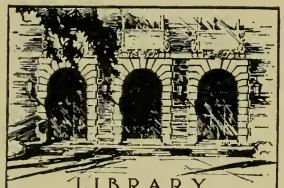

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MISS SHAFTO.

BY

W. E. NORRIS,

AUTHOR OF

"MAJOR AND MINOR," "MY FRIEND JIM," "THE ROGUE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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MISS SHAFTO.

CHAPTER I.

MADGE IS STRICTLY TRUTHFUL.

Mr. Shafto was in one of his bad humours that morning. Norma suspected it as soon as he took his place at the breakfast table, and knew it when he began to abuse the coffee and the omelette and the bread and the hotel and everybody and everything connected therewith, including the Eternal City itself. Also she knew very well what was the matter. Latterly it had always been the arrival of London letters that had upset Mr. Shafto ; and that he had incurred some further losses was just as evident

from his face as if he had announced the fact. Presently he did announce it; for it was almost an impossibility to him to suffer in silence.

"Nobody ever had such luck as I have! Fancy a telegram arriving just half an hour too late!—which entailed a delay of a whole day and a consequent difference to my pocket of—well, a very considerable difference. This comes of being in Italy when one ought to be in London!"

"We can easily return to London," observed Norma, who, however, was not eager to return in order to afford the facilities hinted at.

"Oh, we can shut the stable-door after the horse has been stolen, no doubt. Now, my dear girl, you needn't look at me in that solemn and reproachful way. I am not an absolute idiot, and I have no intention of ending my days in the workhouse; but it *is* rather provoking to drop a lot of money simply through the carelessness of these telegraph people."

"Is it worth while to leave one's self at their mercy?" hazarded Norma.

Mr. Shafto swallowed his cup of tea and his impatience. "When you are a little older and have had a little more experience, Norma," answered he, "you will understand that we are all inevitably at the mercy of chance. A man who begins by demanding perfect safety ends by becoming a hypochondriac. Am I to sit indoors all day because, if I go out, I may be run over in the street? Am I never to travel by rail because railway accidents occur pretty frequently? The most prudent of human beings can't do more than take reasonable precautions."

Norma might have replied that that was all she wished her father to do, but she was aware that no such expression of her wishes would influence him, though it would certainly irritate him; so she said nothing at all.

Possibly he was not altogether ungrateful to her for her forbearance, for, after a

long pause, he resumed : "I do run risks ; you're quite right about that, and I dare say you think it's a mistake to run risks. But nothing venture, nothing have. I can't explain everything to you, and you wouldn't understand me if I did ; only I may tell you that, if the worst comes to the worst, I have always a good round sum invested in really first-class securities. Lämmergeier has very kindly seen to that for me."

"Some people say that Baron Lämmergeier isn't to be implicitly trusted," remarked Norma.

"Oh, I know that's your idea. It isn't mine, and perhaps you'll concede that I know just a little bit more about him than you do. Anyway his credit stands tolerably high at present."

Mr. Shafto rose and walked slowly to the window, where he stood for some time, apparently lost in thought. When he turned round it was to say with a sigh—

"Do you know, Norma, I often wish you were married."

"Because you want to get rid of me?"

Mr. Shafto laughed as he stepped back to her side and pinched her ear. His ill-humour seldom lasted long. "No, you disagreeable and perverse young woman," he answered; "I don't want to get rid of you, though you do sometimes manage to scold me pretty severely without opening your lips. No; it will be a bad day for me when I lose you. But everything is uncertain; life is uncertain. How do I know when I may die and leave you all alone in the world? And so I indulge in dreams occasionally, though I take care to keep my eyes open all the time. Unless they have very much deceived me, there's somebody here who wouldn't be unwilling to take charge of you permanently, Norma."

Norma smiled and shook her head. "I don't know of any such person," she declared; "and certainly I don't know of

any one, except you, by whom I should care to be taken charge of."

Mr. Shafto did not appear to attach much importance to this disclaimer. He laughed again and pursued his own train of thought. "It wouldn't be exactly a grand match—although, Loddondale being a bachelor and likely to remain one, there would be certain possibilities. What I think more of is that Sinclair is really a good, steady fellow; and as far as money goes, why, as I tell you, I have a good round sum in hand, the greater part of which I would make over to you at once. Besides I honestly believe that you will be rich some day. Yes," he added, his face flushing a little; "I honestly do believe that."

"But Lord Walter is not thinking of such a thing; nor am I," said Norma quietly.

Nevertheless, she thought, and indeed could not help thinking, a good deal about it after her father had left her. She was perhaps as little conscious of her personal

charms as any woman who is undeniably beautiful can be. She had never, to her knowledge, been much admired, nor had she coveted admiration, her ambitions and tastes not lying in that direction. At the same time, she was aware that she had classical features and a well-proportioned figure, which advantages were, no doubt, of a nature to attract the artistic eye. It might be that Lord Walter's artistic eye had been pleased by them. This notion, for some reason or other, was excessively disagreeable to her. So disagreeable was it, in fact, that she felt bound to ask herself why it should be. Well, the answer came readily enough. Only a few months back, Lord Walter had been desperately in love with some one else; and as she liked him and wanted to think well of him, she was naturally unwilling to believe that his affection could be so lightly bestowed and withdrawn. Admitting that he had been deceived in Madge and that he was entitled to forget her, it still did not follow that he

was entitled at once to set up another idol on her vacant pedestal. Moreover, she was vexed by the extraordinary conspiracy into which everybody seemed to have entered to marry her to a man whom she had never wished to treat otherwise than as a friend. She was very sorry now that she had consented, against her better judgment, to give him the sittings that he had asked for, and she was a little resentful against him for having asked for them. He might have guessed that he was exposing her to accusations such as that which Madge had formulated. That accusation distressed her a great deal more than Madge would have understood or thought possible, and she was still brooding over it when a waiter came in to ask whether she would receive Lady Shearman.

"Oh yes," she answered, with a sigh; for in truth she was by no means disposed to receive Lady Shearman at that moment.

It was not Madge's custom to use so

much ceremony before looking in upon her friend; but this, it seemed, was to be quite a ceremonious visit. She wore so grave a countenance when she was announced, and swept into the room with such a comical air of quiet dignity, that Norma asked her laughingly what was the matter.

"Have I incurred your displeasure in any way, or have you come to announce some portentous piece of bad news?"

"I think," observed Madge in mildly reproachful accents, "that it is generally I who incur your displeasure nowadays, is it not? However, one ends by becoming hardened, and after the daily domestic experiences that I have to go through, a little extra abuse doesn't seem to matter much."

"I hope you haven't been quarrelling with your husband again," said Norma.

Madge shrugged her shoulders. "I never quarrel with him," she declared. "He made an absurd scene last night when we got back from the theatre, and

to-day he has gone off in the sulks—which is at least better than staying at home and scolding. I need hardly tell you that he is now in a rage with poor Mr. Grey. It seems that I flirted with Mr. Grey yesterday."

"It really did seem a little like it, you know," said Norma, smiling.

"Oh, of course! To you and Christopher it always does seem like it. It would seem like it if I shook hands with the Archbishop of Canterbury and offered to subscribe to the Church House Fund."

"Well, it might," confessed Norma good-humouredly. "Everything depends upon the way in which things are done."

"Really? So that I might even go to the length of posturing as a model to a sculptor, if I only knew how to do it in a proper way?"

"I won't quite say that. You see, Madge, you are a married woman now."

"Oh, it is being married that makes the difference? Then, if either you or Lord

Walter had been married, it wouldn't have been proper for you to behave as you have been doing, I suppose. Ah, well! it's a queer world."

"What do you mean?" asked Norma, puzzled and not best pleased by the other's manner. "I can see that you have come here for some particular purpose. What is it?"

Madge seemed to hesitate. "I was thinking," said she, "that I would tell you—but perhaps, after all, I won't. It might have been a duty to tell you; but as matters have turned out, I dare say you had better not know. I did come with a purpose, though," she added, laughing, as if she had suddenly remembered it. "I met a youth at the door just now who said he had been intrusted with a note for you; so I undertook to deliver it. Here it is."

Thereupon she produced from her pocket the note which she had been so sorely tempted to tamper with, and handed it to

Norma, who glanced at it and laid it down unopened.

A pause ensued, after which Madge slowly got up and sighed. She wanted to be pressed to make her revelation; but since she was not pressed, there was nothing for it but a change of tactics.

"Norma, dear," she said suddenly, "do you think that I cherish a grudge against Lord Walter Sinclair?"

"I hope you don't," answered Norma.

"That means that you think I do. Well, you are right; only it isn't for the reason that you suppose. I told you long ago that I didn't care a bit about him, and if he has given up caring about me, so much the better. But I should be very sorry—very sorry indeed—if you became too fond of him, Norma."

"There is no fear of that," answered Norma quietly.

"Are you sure? It seems to me that you are a great friend of his, and that you like him very much."

"I do like him very much. I have known him since he was a little boy, and I have never heard anything about him that was not to his credit," replied Norma warmly; for she foresaw that she was about to be told of something that was not to Lord Walter's credit.

Madge shook her head solemnly. "You haven't known him all the time, though," she remarked; "and if you had, I don't suppose you would have heard all that there was to be said about him. Of course you remember old Green, who keeps the Shafto Arms. I wonder whether you remember a niece of his who mysteriously disappeared some years ago?"

"Bessie Green? Yes; I remember her perfectly. What about her?"

"She is dead, that's all. I had a letter this morning from her uncle, telling me that it was all over. She came home a few months ago in the last stage of consumption, and I used to go and sit with her sometimes——" Madge paused for a

moment, and then added meaningly, "She went by the name of Mrs. Walter."

Norma had turned a little pale. "Well?" she said.

"I can't tell you anything more. As you may imagine, there was a good deal of talk and gossip about her, and it was generally understood that she had been married to some one above her in rank. She gave herself out as a widow; but some people—Mr. Morley, amongst others—were convinced that her husband was still living, and that his name was Lord Walter Sinclair."

"I don't wonder at their having thought so," returned Norma composedly. "As there was a mystery about her, and as she called herself Walter, that was a natural enough conjecture. But they were certainly mistaken; and the proof is that Lord Walter asked you to marry him last summer. Whatever you may think about him, you must know that he couldn't have done that if he had had a wife living at the time."

"Oh, she was living at the time, no doubt; but she was also dying at the time. That is what shows him to be so heartless. At least, I mean that it would show him to be heartless, if the story were true; but of course I don't for a moment assert that it is. I only repeat what I have heard."

"It is not true," said Norma; "I don't believe a word of it."

"Oh, it may be false from beginning to end; still, one would like to have some proof."

"Perhaps," said Norma, after considering for a moment, "the simplest plan would be to ask him."

But this was a plan the simplicity of which did not at all commend itself to Madge. She protested, with scandalized exclamations. As if one could possibly do such a thing as that! What would he think? And what answer would he be likely to make? One could hardly suppose that, if he had taken so much pains to keep his secret during poor Bessie's

lifetime, he would let it out now that she was dead and buried. Besides, what right had Norma to question him? "Of course I don't know—if you have a right, that is different."

Norma smiled. "I certainly have none," she replied tranquilly; "only, if people seriously believed this story, it would perhaps be friendly to give him a chance of undeceiving them. But now that I think of it, I see how absurd it is. Mr. Green, who has a keen eye to his own interests, would have made claims long ago if there had been the slightest ground for making any."

Madge shrugged her shoulders. "Mr. Green may have found it to his interest to hold his tongue," she observed; "he has not been a loser by his niece's marriage, I understand."

However, she did not venture to say much more, fearing lest she should be led into telling some direct lie, with which she might be charged hereafter, and guessing that she had already made as complete

a success of her calumny as she could have hoped for. That Norma should affect to be incredulous was only what might have been anticipated; and, indeed, it seemed best to conclude by associating herself with that incredulity.

"It is only a conjecture. Probably we shall never know the real truth about poor Bessie, and perhaps I ought not to have repeated all this. I can hardly believe that he would have been so cold-blooded —although I certainly don't think that he has much heart."

That, to tell the truth, was Norma's own impression of him. She had never been able quite to pardon the commonsense view that he had taken of his love-affair with Madge. "If she be not fair for me, what care I how fair she be?" is a refrain which every disappointed lover is prone to sing, and may be excused for singing; but then no one supposes that he really means it. Lord Walter really had meant it, and had acted so thoroughly in the

spirit of the sentiment that the woman whom he had once adored had now become simply a bore to him. And this he did not hesitate to say. The note which he had penned shortly after his interview with Sir Christopher, and which Norma read as soon as she was alone, set forth with more of emphasis than chivalry the view that he now took of Lady Shearman's character. In his eagerness to convince Miss Shafto that he had been in no way to blame for that unlucky scene at the Coliseum, he went a good deal farther than was necessary for his purpose. There are certain imputations which a man must bear, if people are stupid enough to cast them upon him. Norma, when she had read all that he had to say, tore the sheet across with an impatient gesture, and tossed the halves into the fire. She did not like his sending her this elaborate explanation; and she liked still less the terms in which it was couched. After all, he owed her no explanations.

And then, although she told herself that this romance about poor Bessie Green was a palpable invention, she could not help thinking that it would have been very like Walter Sinclair to act as that unfortunate woman's husband was said to have acted. One could easily imagine how she would have alienated him by her vulgarity, by her bad temper, by this or that offence which he would have considered unendurable, and how he would have felt quite justified in pensioning her off and bidding her adieu, with an intimation that she was not what he had taken her for.

This was very unfair; but, alas! who doesn't have unfair thoughts at times? And who can listen to slander without being in any degree influenced by it? We all think that we can; and it may be that a good many of us are really uninfluenced by it, so far as conduct goes; yet it is to be feared that that man knew something of his fellow-men who gave the sinister advice—"Calomniez, calomniez! il en restera toujours quelquechose."

CHAPTER II.

NORMA'S PATIENCE IS TRIED.

Lady Spencer Sinclair had been a good deal put out by the moonlit wrangle of which she had been an unwilling witness. She was accustomed, and had always been accustomed, to a life free from jolts and jars; to listen to high words was as disagreeable to her as it would have been to look on at any painful or disgusting sight, such as an accident or an operation, and long use and wont had given her an impression that it was her right to be protected from such unpleasantnesses. Therefore she was not only much incensed against the vulgar and coarse Sir Christopher and his silly little wife, but was

inclined to be displeased with Mr. Shafto for having introduced her to such people, and with her nephew for having got himself into trouble, and even with Norma for having known no better than to allow a *fracas* to take place. One and all, they dropped down to a low level in her esteem, and for upwards of thirty-six hours she felt as if she didn't wish to see any of them again. But, at the end of that time, being a good-natured woman, she forgave some of them. She had become really fond of Norma, for whom she had that sort of wondering admiration that selfish persons often have for those who are not selfish; and, having started by merely acquiescing in her nephew's suit, was now extremely anxious that he should be successful. Besides, at the moment, she wanted somebody to go out driving with her.

Accordingly, she betook herself to the Hôtel Bristol to pick up her young friend, whom she thus unintentionally provided with a further opportunity of displaying

unselfishness. For Norma was not at all inclined to drive with Lady Spencer that afternoon, being out of spirits and, as far as it was possible to her to be so, out of temper. However, she did not excuse herself (for she was well aware that she could not do that without giving offence), but got ready at once and ran downstairs to join the old lady, by whom she was affectionately received.

"Do you know," said Lady Spencer, with charming candour, while they were proceeding at a brisk pace towards the Porta del Popolo, "I was very nearly washing my hands of the whole pack of you yesterday — I was indeed! Very horrid of me, and very ungrateful, I admit; but if there is a thing that would make me renounce those nearest and dearest to me, it is the risk of being involved in a brawl. I can stand a great deal of chaperon duty; I can stand being put on sentry-go in a studio for hours together; and I can stand a limited amount of

scrambling among ruins in the dead of the night; but brawling I can *not* stand!"

"I don't think I am very fond of brawling either," remarked Norma, laughing a little.

Lady Spencer took her hand and patted it. "My dear, I know that; I'm only making a humble confession. All the same, I do hope and trust that I have seen the last of those impossible Shearman people. Was that exhibition a sample of their customary way of going on?"

Norma attempted some defence of Sir Christopher. Of course he had forgotten himself, but he had been very sorry for it afterwards, and had begged everybody's pardon. He was not a bad-hearted man, though he was passionate and unreasonably jealous. Perhaps, too, it might be admitted that he had had some little provocation.

"Oh," returned Lady Spencer, "a savage is always excusable for behaving like a savage, I suppose; only one doesn't want

to associate with those primitive types of humanity. As for the provocation, I don't deny it for a moment. Indeed, his wife was quite as bad as he was, if not worse, and if he had seen fit to castigate her upon the spot, it is not I who should have called the police. Why Walter allowed her to inveigle him away from us like that I can't imagine; but I dare say he won't do it again. Has he made his peace with you yet?"

"Made his peace with me?" repeated Norma, slightly irritated by the question. "I don't quite understand. We haven't quarrelled that I know of."

Lady Spencer laughed. "I apologize; I ought to have asked whether he has explained to you that Lady Shearman took possession of him by main force."

"Oh yes, he has done that," answered Norma, laughing a little too; "but I think he might just as well have left it undone. For one thing, it wasn't very polite to poor Madge; and for another, it

really doesn't concern me to know whether he was willing to be taken possession of or not."

"Quite sure of that?"

Lady Spencer turned her head and looked her companion full in the eyes as she put this query; and it was without any pretence of ignoring its significance that Norma replied gravely, "Perfectly sure."

"Well, if it is so, I'm sorry—very sorry. I can't say that I have ever been particularly sanguine; still I hoped there was a chance—and I'm not certain that I don't hope so still. Speaking quite impartially, I should think twice before rejecting Walter, if I were a young woman. One doesn't marry a man for his talents, nor even perhaps for his good looks; but an excellent moral character is no such bad thing in a husband, and he has the recommendation of being devoted to you, heart and soul. Added to which, he is one of those quiet, undemonstrative people who never change."

"Is he?" said Norma. "I don't think that is quite the description that I should have given of him. But whatever else he may be, he is certainly not devoted to me in the way that you mean, and I sincerely hope he never will be. I wish I had not consented to give him those sittings. I would not have done it if I had thought for a moment that they would cause so much misunderstanding."

Lady Spencer's opinion of her nephew's chances was not made any worse by this declaration. He could not, of course, be accepted before he had proposed, nor could any girl very well have answered otherwise than as Miss Shafto had done. She laughed and answered, "There has been no misunderstanding about the sittings. I made myself responsible for them at the outset, and I'll undertake to say that nobody has misconstrued your good nature. If misunderstandings have arisen out of other circumstances, I'm not to blame for that, and I shan't attempt to set them

right. Only I hope there's no harm in my saying that I should very much like you to be my niece."

She not unnaturally thought that Norma had been offended by Walter's apparent desertion of her for Lady Shearman at the Coliseum, and she surmised that the apology which her nephew had made had not been very skilfully worded. As she intended to give him a chance of atoning for his awkwardness no later than that very afternoon, she judged it best for the present to let the subject drop.

"Is it the case that Lady Shearman is a sister of Lady Huddersfield's?" she asked.

Norma replied that it was.

"Ah, that accounts for her silliness then. A more absolute goose than Lady Huddersfield I have never met. Fancy a woman like that, with the education of a charity-girl and no mother-wit at all, attempting to make her house a political centre! I went to two of her receptions last season, and I really felt quite sorry for the poor

thing; though, as there were heaps of nonentities there, I dare say she was too stupid to understand what a *fiasco* she had made."

Thus, during the remainder of the drive, Norma was entertained with details bearing upon a rivalry with which this narrative has nothing to do, and from which she was led to conclude that Lady Huddersfield was not the only fashionable personage whose political ambition had resulted in a *fiasco*. She was very willing to talk about anybody or anything except Lord Walter, and she was not at all pleased to find him sitting in Lady Spencer's drawing-room when, towards evening, she was conducted thither to have a cup of tea.

He, on the other hand, was very pleased to see her, because he had not anticipated the meeting which his kind aunt had arranged for him. So pleased was he that he scarcely noticed the unusual chilliness with which Norma accosted him, though Lady Spencer noticed it and was amused

by it, thinking it rather a favourable sign than otherwise. "One doesn't behave in that way to a man whom one means to refuse," that observant lady reflected.

And so, to relieve any embarrassment from which the young people might be supposed to be suffering, she obligingly took the whole burden of the conversation upon herself and chattered away fluently for half an hour, at the expiration of which time Norma rose.

"Are you going to walk home?" Lady Spencer asked; and, having obtained an affirmative reply, she added, "Then I dare say Walter will see you safely to your hotel."

"I shall be only too delighted," put in Walter with alacrity.

But Norma declared that she wanted no escort. What possible risk could be run by walking a quarter of a mile in broad daylight through some of the most frequented streets of Rome? As far as that went, she was in the habit of walking

through streets which were not frequented, and she had hitherto done so with impunity. To avoid further discussion she said good-bye rather abruptly, and was out of the house long before any servant could be summoned to open the door for her.

But these were mistaken tactics to adopt with a man whose will was strong and whose legs were long. Not many yards had she advanced upon her way when Walter's voice close to her ear said, "As we are going in the same direction, perhaps you won't mind my company so far."

"Not at all," answered Norma in a tone of polite resignation.

"From the haste with which you fled, I was almost afraid that you did," he observed rather resentfully; "but I thought I would chance your displeasure. Did you get my note?"

"Yes, thank you. It didn't require an answer, did it?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I rather thought it did. That is, I should have

been glad to have one. But you can give it me now by word of mouth, which will be more satisfactory."

"I don't know that there is very much to be said. You only wrote to tell me what you had told me before."

"But I wasn't sure that you believed me when I told you before. Do you believe me now?"

"I quite believe that you didn't wish to be left alone with Madge; you made that sufficiently apparent at the time. I only thought that you might perhaps have helped straying such a long way off and losing sight of us; but I dare say you couldn't help it. And, after all, it is a great deal more your business and hers and Sir Christopher's than mine."

Walter looked at her inquiringly. "I have offended you," said he, "and I don't understand how. Would you mind telling me what I have done?"

"I am not exactly offended with you," she answered; "only I wish you didn't

think it necessary to say disagreeable things about Madge."

"Hasn't she rather deserved to have some disagreeable things said about her?"

"Perhaps; but you are hardly the person who ought to say them. You might leave that to her husband."

"Who, I am beginning to suspect, gets as good as he gives. Very well; I'll endeavour to say no more about her. Only, you know, I can't be like you, Miss Shafto; I can't keep my eyes resolutely fixed upon people's good qualities and ignore all their evil ones. Compared with you, I shall always be a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal; though you'll admit that I can appreciate true charity when I see it."

Never in her life had Norma felt less inclined to exhibit that virtue or to be identified with it. She sighed impatiently. "Oh yes, I know," she said; "you have told me so once or twice before." And then, with some compunction, "I beg your pardon; but I am just a little bit tired of

the subject; and I suppose I shall hear a good deal more of it when your statue is completed and exhibited."

Poor Walter was utterly taken aback by this unexpected snub. He walked along beside her, without speaking, for some distance, and then said, in a tone of deep mortification, "The statue shall never be completed or exhibited unless you wish. I would much rather reduce it to powder than give you a moment's annoyance."

"Nonsense!" she returned, laughing. "I am not in the least annoyed with you or your statue, it is only that I am in a horrid bad temper to-day. I have concealed it pretty well from everybody so far, and I should have concealed it from you if you hadn't insisted upon running after me. Now let me say good-bye before I disgrace myself any further."

As they had by this time reached their destination, and as she extended her hand to him in a resolute way, he could only accept his dismissal; though he would have

liked very much to inquire what had happened to produce so unprecedented a result as loss of temper on Miss Shafto's part. He was turning away when he brushed against Sir Christopher Shearman, who was in the act of effecting what looked like a stealthy entrance.

"Beg your pardon!" muttered Sir Christopher. "How are you? Rather in a hurry—good night;" and so hastened up the stairs which Norma had already mounted.

Sir Christopher had spent a most unhappy day. He had sallied forth in the morning with his head high and with an inward consciousness not only of victory but of rectitude. He had let his wife see that he was not to be trifled with, and that if he could beg pardon when in the wrong, that was all the more reason why he should show himself inflexible when in the right. But poor Sir Christopher had not in him the stuff of which victors are made. Perhaps his heart was too soft; perhaps his

moral courage was too feeble; or possibly he may have suffered from the fatal evil of not knowing exactly what he wanted. Be this as it may, he had become extremely wretched before noon, and, having played two or three games of billiards at the club, was sorely puzzled to think how he was to get through the remainder of the day. He had said that he would not return home before dinner-time, and until dinner-time he was fully determined to remain out; though he now began to doubt whether Madge would find this punishment a very hard one to bear, after all. Meanwhile, there was nothing for it but to smoke and drink whisky-and-soda, in which unwholesome fashion he employed himself for several consecutive hours.

About five o'clock Mr. Grey looked into the smoking-room, and, catching sight of the gloomy-looking, red-bearded man in the armchair, accosted him affably.

"How do you do, Sir Christopher? Lady Shearman not tired after last night,

I hope? I wonder whether I should find her at home if I called at your hotel presently?"

Sir Christopher jumped up as if he had been stung. "No," he answered roughly, "you won't find her at home, because I've given orders that she isn't to be at home when you call. I dare say you young fellows think it very good fun to go about flirting with married women, and I dare say it's the custom, and everybody does it, and so forth and so forth. But it don't suit me, and I'd just as soon tell you so plainly."

Mr. Grey raised his eyebrows and stared with smiling interest for a moment at this strange specimen of humanity. Then he drew a silver card-case from his pocket. "Perhaps," said he, "you will kindly give my card to Lady Shearman and explain why I can't have the pleasure of calling upon her personally. And here is one for yourself. I should be sorry to be guilty of any breach of courtesy."

With that he retired; and immediately

afterwards there arose from the corridor outside a roar of laughter which caused the unhappy Sir Christopher to writhe. What an ass he had made of himself! Of course that young wretch would tell the story all over Rome, and he would be fairly laughed out of the place. All of a sudden he made up his mind that he would forestall the mockers. He would leave the very next morning, if Madge would consent to it—and he was ready to purchase her consent by an act of the humblest submission. Anything would be better than that she should hear what had occurred and join in that dreadful chorus of hilarity.

So, with a swift and guilty step, he stole back to the hotel and presently entered his sitting-room, where, to his surprise and great distress, he found his wife dissolved in tears.

Down plumped Sir Christopher upon his knees beside her, shaking the house. "Don't cry, Madge! don't cry, my dear!" he exclaimed. "I've come to tell you how sorry

I am. And I dare say I was wrong—and it shan't occur again. And look here, Madge, I want to get out of this confounded place, where we've neither of us been very happy, have we?"

CHAPTER III.

A WAITING GAME.

MADGE'S tears, it need scarcely be said, had not been made to flow either by her husband's absence or by his previous harshness. She had other and better reasons for weeping than that; and Sir Christopher, had he only known it, was casting himself at the feet of a sinner quite as repentant as himself. Hardly, in truth, had Madge regained her own room, after slandering an innocent man, as above related, when the reaction for which all timid sinners ought to be prepared set in, and she began to wish with all her heart that she had held her tongue. It was not that she felt any severe pangs of conscience on account of the innocent man. Innocent he

might be of that particular offence; but he had been guilty of others which deprived him of all claim upon her sympathy. What really grieved her was, firstly, that, for the sake of avenging herself, she had made misrepresentations which might possibly cause a great deal of unhappiness to her best friend, and secondly, that there was a very good chance indeed of her being found out.

The latter reflection, no doubt, was more distressing to her than the former; but it would not have troubled her so much had she been less sincerely attached to Norma. She could not bear the idea of losing Norma's friendship; and of course she would lose it if the facts were discovered; because the childish plea that she had told no actual lie would certainly not avail her in that quarter. And the facts might so easily be discovered! Lord Walter might be interrogated; Lord Loddondale might take it into his head to avow his marriage; a dozen people could testify that Lady

Shearman and the late Mrs. Walter had been upon intimate terms; and then it would be pretty evident that either the late Mrs. Walter or Lady Shearman had made a false statement. One of them could have had no conceivable motive for so doing, whereas the motive of the other might be readily conjectured. All this was clear enough, and Madge was truly sorry that it had not been so clear to her earlier in the day. Throughout the afternoon she was haunted by fears and tormented by self-reproaches; insomuch that by the time Sir Christopher came in she had begun to cry about it.

She began to laugh too when he dropped upon his knees, partly because he looked so funny in that attitude, and partly because his misconception of the situation tickled her; and so, being upon the verge of hysterics and in urgent need of sympathy, she was not very reluctant about according the forgiveness that he craved.

"Only I do hope," said she, "that you will try not to put me to such open humiliation in future. It is bad enough to be stormed at privately; but at least one would like to keep up appearances before one's friends."

"I know—I know!" answered the penitent Sir Christopher. "I ought to be ashamed of myself, and I am ashamed of myself—awfully ashamed! And—and the sooner we get out of this the better. Don't you think so, Madge?" he added eagerly.

"Yes, I certainly do," replied Madge, who was now fully as anxious to escape from Rome as her husband could be. "I suppose we must stay until after Easter; but then I shall be quite ready for a move. Where shall we go?"

"Oh, wherever you like. Naples, Florence—anywhere! But after all, do you care so very much about seeing these ecclesiastical performances? Everybody tells me that they're disappointing."

Madge did not care in the least about the "ecclesiastical performances;" but she did feel some curiosity as to her husband's reasons for wishing to hurry her away. "Are you anxious to leave by the next train?" she inquired.

"Oh no; not by the next train. But I thought, if you had no objection, we might get off to-morrow. The fact is, I am thoroughly sick of the place."

"It would be a great scramble," observed Madge—for she had learnt that ready concessions were not good for Sir Christopher —"still, I dare say I could just manage it. I don't mind the inconvenience, or the giving up what we have come all this way to see, or anything, if only you will be a little kind and pleasant about it. But it would be rather hard to be dragged off at a moment's notice because you had taken up some preposterous notion that it isn't safe for me to be near Lord Walter Sinclair and Mr. Grey."

"I give you my word of honour,"

answered Sir Christopher earnestly, "that I have no notion of the kind. It isn't that at all. I was quite mistaken about Sinclair; and as for Grey"—here he could not repress a slight shudder—"well, I dare say you wouldn't see more of Grey if you stayed here another month. Sure to be busy, you know; these diplomatic people always are."

Madge made him plead a little longer, and also exacted from him a full retractation of every word that he had uttered on the previous evening. Furthermore—because there is nothing like striking while the iron is hot—she led him on to promise that, as some slight compensation for the disappointment which he was inflicting upon her, he would take a house in London for at least two months during the coming season. So that, upon the whole, she did not do badly and was able to eat her dinner with a better appetite than Sir Christopher, who felt that there could be no safety for him until he should be seated in the railway-carriage.

Not until the next morning were the Shaftos informed that their friends proposed to leave for Naples by the one o'clock train. Madge, who ran downstairs after breakfast to impart this news to Norma, represented herself, with a shrug of her shoulders, as the victim of one of her husband's unaccountable caprices.

"Anything for a quiet life!" she said. "I don't think we know a soul in Naples; so perhaps Christopher may be kept in a tolerably good humour there. I must ask you to say good-bye to our friends here for me. Of course I shan't have time; and if I had, I shouldn't dare to do it, lest I should get into trouble again."

Norma undertook this commission, and presently received a further request with which she was quite willing to comply.

"You won't say anything to Lord Walter about what I told you, will you?" asked Madge. "It may be quite untrue, you see, and I shouldn't have mentioned it to

you if I hadn't been afraid of—of horrid things happening."

"Nothing horrid is going to happen," answered Norma, laughing. "As for the story, I never doubted its being untrue, and I haven't the slightest intention of speaking to Lord Walter about it."

Madge gave a sigh of relief. She had been in mortal dread lest Norma, in her straightforward way, should seek information as to this mystery in the quarter whence alone trustworthy information could be derived. Yet the next moment, feeling it to be a little unsatisfactory that she should have burdened her conscience with an altogether ineffectual sin, she observed pensively, "All the same, it *may* be true, you know. Why are you so certain that it isn't?"

"I told you why yesterday," answered Norma; "I don't want to talk about it or think about it any more. When shall I see you again, Madge?"

Madge shook her head and said she was

sure she didn't know. For the first time in her life she felt no desire to arrange any future meeting with her friend, and therefore did not mention the probability of her being in London during the season.

Presently Mr. Shafto came in, full of regret and surprise at the tidings which had just reached him; and after a few minutes Madge went upstairs to make preparations for the journey. Sir Christopher did not show himself until the last moment, when he took leave of his friends in a hurried, furtive manner, as though he had been afraid (and indeed so he was) that there might be a third person in the room whom he did not wish to encounter. His exit had so much the appearance of flight that even the unobservant Mr. Shafto remarked upon it, saying—

"I wonder what's wrong with Shearman? If one didn't know that he was a millionaire, one would think he was decamping without having paid his bills."

What had been wrong with Sir Chris-

topher was very soon made known to all who cared to hear about it. To expect that Mr. Grey should keep so capital a joke to himself would have been expecting too much of mortal man, and for several days the gaiety of Roman society was appreciably augmented by the story of the designing diplomatist and the jealous baronet. After that somebody else did something which enabled his neighbours to bear false witness against him, and the Shearmans, being out of sight, passed out of the public mind.

Three weeks elapsed—quickly for some people, rather slowly for others. Easter came and went; the heat of the noonday sun had perceptibly increased; members of the English colony were beginning to consult their *Bradshaw* and look with interest at the daily weather report in the *Times*, to see whether the east wind was still blowing at home. Walter Sinclair was one of those to whom this period of time had seemed long; for somehow or other he

had seen next to nothing of Norma Shafto in the course of it. He had, it is true, met her pretty frequently, and she had always spoken to him in a friendly way; but he had not once seen her alone, nor, do what he would, could he ever manage to find her free from the company of some obnoxious third person. In the long-run it became evident to him that this was not the result of accident, and the discovery depressed him not a little. He took his sorrows and his doubts to Lady Spencer, who laughed at him.

"I had no idea that you were so faint-hearted," she declared. "At least you might give the poor young woman a chance of refusing you."

"But that is just what I don't want to do," returned Walter. "I am sure that if I asked her now to marry me she would refuse me, and I can't help fancying that I have displeased her in some way. Do you think Lady Shearman can have said anything to her about me?"

"There is nothing to be said, my dear Walter. A great deal might be said about the generality of men; but everybody knows that you have always been the good boy of the family. Besides, Miss Shafto is quite sharp enough to estimate the value of information derived from that source."

"Well," sighed Walter, "I suppose there is nothing for it but to wait."

"How long? Till leap-year comes round again? Some bolder man will have elbowed you unceremoniously aside before then, I suspect. Anyhow, I really don't see what more I can do for you."

Nevertheless, she tried to do a little more, because she was fond of her nephew and of Norma, as well as of her own way. Meeting Mr. Shafto one afternoon at the house of a friend, she asked him confidentially whether he knew that people were talking about his daughter and Lord Walter. "Not in any disagreeable way," she explained; "still they are talking.

And between ourselves, I think there is perhaps some little ground for it."

Then she went on to avow that, for her part, she would not be sorry if fire were discovered beneath this smoke. "I don't know any girl whom I would rather have for my niece than your daughter; and I needn't ask whether you would object to Walter, because I am sure nobody could object to him. He isn't a rich man, certainly, but I really think that he is in a fair way to become well off. The Americans have found him out; and that, as you are aware, means money. As for fame, people who ought to know tell me that he has as good a chance of gaining that as any young sculptor in Rome."

Mr. Shafto made a polite and complimentary reply. His wishes, he said, were thoroughly in accordance with those of Lady Spencer and her nephew; but she would understand that he was quite unable to answer for his daughter. "Young women, as well as young men, insist upon

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choosing for themselves; the utmost that we can claim is a conditional right of veto. For myself, I need hardly tell you that the longer Norma remains with me the happier I shall be."

The fact was that Mr. Shafto had had pretty good news from England and was consequently less desirous of seeing his daughter provided for than he had been a short time previously. Lady Spencer had to make the best of his assurance that he was as much on her side as he could be on the side of anybody who proposed to inflict a bereavement upon him. "It isn't in my power to give your nephew any active assistance," he declared; "I should probably do him a great deal more harm than good if I were to attempt it."

Thus Norma escaped persecution, while Walter obtained little encouragement from his aunt, who spoke of leaving for England shortly, and suggested to him rather heartlessly that if he was doomed to a disappointment in Rome, he would most

likely feel better after a season in London. His own conviction was that to win Norma would be no easy task, and that lapse of time would be favourable to his chances of success. He was not much afraid of that bolder man, spoken of by Lady Spencer, who might possibly elbow him out of the way.

Yet audacity often wins where prudence fails; and this view of the case was somewhat disagreeably forced upon his attention one evening when he was returning homewards after a long solitary ride across the Campagna. During the winter season no one can ride in the neighbourhood of Rome without encountering numerous parties of English people, mounted upon hired horses, whose presence cannot, perhaps, be counted among the charms which belong to that strange and melancholy district; but the English people were on the move now, and for two hours Walter had seen no living being except a few wild-looking *contadini,* wrapped in their

long cloaks and bestriding their sorry steeds with the air of sombre dignity which is the birthright of the Roman peasant. It was only on nearing the city that he descried, jogging along the road in front of him, about half a dozen ladies and gentlemen, some of whose backs he recognized. Not feeling in a companionable mood, he turned aside and cantered past them across the grass at a sufficient distance to avoid the necessity of saluting them; and so it was that he presently became aware of an advanced guard of two persons, the sight of whom caused him to draw in his breath, and then utter an angry exclamation.

Well, to be sure, there was no reason why Miss Shafto should not be riding with Mr. Grey. She had done it often enough before; and Grey was a gay young butterfly, whose attentions to ladies were too general to be dangerous in any particular case; yet Walter did not like it. He pulled his horse back into a trot and

watched them as he drew nearer, and it seemed to him that they were enjoying themselves very much together. He could hear Norma laughing—what could she find to laugh at in Grey's callow witticisms? It was irritating that she should be able to derive amusement from that sort of thing. Yet, when all was said, she was a woman; and it is notorious that women frequently like men who to their fellow-men seem a trifle contemptible.

Meanwhile, Mr. Grey, hearing the beat of an approaching horse's hoofs, had glanced over his shoulder; and Walter might have been reassured by the friendly manner in which that good-natured young man hailed him. "Hullo, Sinclair! where have you sprung from? You haven't got such a thing as a spare pocket-handkerchief about you, have you?"

Walter took off his hat to Norma, who nodded to him. "Yes," he answered, "I think I have."

"Then lend it to me, will you, like a good fellow? Mine is soaking wet from the tears that I've been shedding. Miss Shafto tells me that she is going to leave us."

Walter's heart sank, though this was no more than what he had been expecting to hear any day for some time past. "Are you really going away at once?" he asked Norma.

"Yes," she answered; "we start the day after to-morrow for Venice, and then I suppose we shall make for home—if one can call Upper Belgrave Street home."

"At any rate, there will be no place like it to me, so long as you are there," observed Grey sentimentally.

"Shall I see you again before you go?" asked Walter, after a pause.

"Oh, I hope so. To-morrow afternoon a few people are coming to tea with us for the last time. Perhaps you will look in, if you have nothing better to do."

That was as much as to say that she did

not wish to see him again, except in the presence of a "few people." He could not help feeling hurt, though he knew that he was not entitled to feel hurt, and it was but a small consolation to notice that she was paying no attention to the unceasing flow of Mr. Grey's jocularities. He rode beside the couple as far as the city gates, and then wished them good night. What was the use of seeing Miss Shafto to her own door, since she was already provided with an escort who evidently had no intention of resigning his functions?

CHAPTER IV.

FAREWELL.

It is a melancholy reflection for those who are getting on in life and whose friends are dying off that the chances are very much against their ever being able to fill the gaps left by the scythe of Time. Solitude is the doom of old age; and though most of us know a certain number of popular old women (who, by the way, are seldom amiable old women), popular old men are, for some reason or other, much more scarce. On the other hand, if an old gentleman does manage to achieve popularity, he is usually very popular indeed; and such was the happy case of Mr. Shafto. He took so unfeigned an interest in his fellow-creatures and was so perfectly free

from prejudices of any sort or kind that he was liked wherever he went; and in Rome, as elsewhere, he had a host of appreciative acquaintances. Furthermore, he was the father of a beautiful daughter, a circumstance which always has a tendency to swell anybody's visiting-list.

Consequently, Walter Sinclair, on presenting himself at the Hôtel Bristol at the hour which Norma had mentioned to him, found many carriages waiting before the door and had some difficulty in making his way through the throng which had gathered in her little sitting-room to bid her farewell. Grey was there, skipping about with cakes and teacups; so were sundry solemn, handsome young Romans; while of ladies there were far more than there were chairs for them to sit upon. Lady Spencer, who had secured a vacant one near the door, beckoned to her nephew, and, when he had approached in obedience to her signal, whispered—

"Well, are you going to do the deed

this afternoon? You haven't much more time to think about it in, you know."

He shook his head and made a disgusted grimace. "Is it likely that I shall have a chance of 'doing the deed,' as you call it, in such a crowd?"

"The crowd will disperse in due time, I presume. Somebody must be the last to leave, and if I were you, I should be that person."

"But Mr. Shafto won't leave, you see."

"Mr. Shafto will give you five minutes, in which time a great deal may be said. I know he will be out of the room for five minutes, because I mean to stick to this chair like a limpet to a rock until everybody else has gone; after which he will have to take me down to my carriage and wait there while I talk to him about a variety of interesting subjects. See what it is to have a kind and thoughtful aunt!"

Well, no doubt Lady Spencer's intentions were thoroughly kind; but he did not think he would take advantage of her

kindness in the way that she meant him to do. As, however, he was very anxious to have a few words with Norma, he contented himself with a mental reservation, and, after expressing his thanks, prepared for a period of patient waiting. As Norma's visitors began to depart, one by one, his purpose became evident. He saw that she was aware of it, and he also saw, with some satisfaction and relief, that the discovery did not displease her. She even threw him a little smile and a despairing glance because an old lady, who had lingered behind all the rest, could not get to the end of an involved narrative, of which no one but herself had heard the beginning. But at length the old lady said she was really afraid she must be going; and as soon as she had been got rid of, Lady Spencer loyally carried out her programme.

Norma sat down behind the tea-table and sighed wearily. "Do you like people of your own class?" she asked. "To me

the poor are so much more interesting. Their range of subjects isn't wide, but those that they do talk about are quite real and of the greatest importance to them."

"In addition to which, they generally want help. That is what makes them interesting to you, I imagine. You see, your point of view is a little peculiar. What you ask of others is, 'How can I be of use to you?' What most people ask of a fresh acquaintance is, 'How can you be of use to me?'"

"Is that what you ask?"

He laughed. "Not in so many words, perhaps; but probably, if the truth were known, I prefer receiving benefits to conferring them. You ought to consider me a favourable specimen of my class; for I began asking you to help me very soon after I met you that evening at Mrs. Lämmergeier's, and I have gone on requesting favours pretty constantly ever since."

"Have you? They must have been

very small ones, then, for I don't remember them."

"You can't have forgotten all the weary hours that you spent in my studio. It isn't very wise of me to remind you of them, perhaps; for you told me the other day how tired you were of the subject."

"I am very sorry I said that; I didn't mean you to take it seriously. Of course they were not weary hours at all, and I shall always like to be reminded of them."

Walter's face brightened. "Then," said he, "I think, after all, I will be bold enough to tell you what I have done; though I had almost made up my mind to say nothing about it. A few weeks ago I modelled a small replica of that figure, hoping that possibly you would accept it as a memento of your kindness. The cast has been taken already, and the marble will be finished before very long. May I have it forwarded to your London address? It will only stand about two feet high, so that it won't be a very cumbrous object."

It would be a very costly object in proportion to its size; but that Norma did not know; nor did she hesitate for a moment to take the present offered to her. "How very good of you!" she exclaimed. "I shall value it immensely and exhibit it with pride to my friends when I am old and fat and when you are celebrated."

The truth was that she did not suspect, and never had really suspected, Walter of being in love with her. She had avoided him latterly because others had chosen to misconstrue their intimacy and because she did not wish to give any further excuse for such misconstructions; but now that she was going away, her heart had become greatly softened towards him. Also she was conscious of having admitted certain thoughts into her mind about him which she hoped were unjust. Indeed, that was why she had been glad to see his intention of sitting out her other visitors. There was something which she had been more than half inclined to say to him, and while

he was thanking her with somewhat exaggerated warmth for her generous acceptance of his gift, she was wondering how she might best put this into words. Consequently her next observation sounded somewhat irrelevant to his ears.

"Do you remember Mr. Morley?" she asked.

"The self-satisfied young man with the bushy head of hair? Oh yes, I remember him. Has he set fire to the Thames yet?"

"No," answered Norma, laughing; "he has only written an article in the *Omniscient Review*. At least, I suppose it is by him, as it has been sent to me, and it is signed B. M. It is upon the subject we were talking about just now," she added, explanatory—"the differences of character that one notices between the rich and the poor. Perhaps it might amuse you to look through it."

Walter did not think that at all likely, nor was he inclined to waste precious time in discussing Mr. Morley or the productions

of his brain. He glanced rather contemptuously at the article, which had been marked with a cross in red ink, so that the recipient should have no doubt as to what she was intended to peruse, and which was headed, "The Dry-Rot of Civilization."

"Described and exemplified, I presume," observed Walter. "I can imagine nobody better qualified to lay down the law upon such a theme. Is it a fragment of autobiography?"

"You will see what it is if you will take it away and read it," answered Norma. "There are some things in it which seem to me well put, though I don't agree with Mr. Morley's general drift. I should rather like to hear how it strikes you."

Walter gladly undertook what seemed to promise a speedy renewal of communications with Norma. "May I write and deliver my judgment when I have formed it, then?" he asked.

"Oh, it isn't worth the trouble of writing about. It won't take you a quarter of

an hour to read the article, and I thought perhaps you would be at the station to-morrow. A number of our friends are coming there to see the last of us, I believe."

All this was, after a fashion, satisfactory, because it showed that Miss Shafto, if she had ever been offended, was offended no longer; but then it also showed plainly enough that she believed herself to be speaking to one who was a friend and nothing more. Walter did not say a word to undeceive her; and indeed there was no time for him to say more, for now Mr. Shafto re-entered the room, rubbing his hands and remarking that the sun might be hot, but that it was uncommonly cold in the shade —especially when you were kept standing there for a quarter of an hour without your hat. Doubtless Lady Spencer had stretched the poor man's patience as far as it would go.

In the course of the evening, Walter duly perused Mr. Morley's article, which he

thought extremely silly, though the style, being flashy and rhetorical, had a certain attractiveness. The writer's intention was not made very clear, but he apparently sought to show that a high state of civilization is not conducive to the upholding of a high standard of morality; that it is the tendency of a refined and complex order of society to exalt its own requirements at the expense of those of the old-fashioned laws of right and wrong; that only in the lower ranks does any one now think of judging his own actions or those of his neighbours by such laws, and that the English aristocracy in particular, alarmed by the evident writingo n the wall, reserves the penalty of ostracism for such of its members as behave in a way to hasten its inevitable downfall.

"I do not," observed this philosophical onlooker, who wrote throughout in the first person, and used the pronoun freely, "presume to distinguish between right and wrong in the abstract; I do not even affirm that such a distinction exists. I merely

state my conviction that for an indefinite time to come it will be found necessary to assume its existence, possibly also its divine sanction, and that the class which recognizes this in its simplest form will be politically and socially predominant. The labourers and artisans who already rule England take their stand, consciously or unconsciously, upon the decalogue; the upper classes, on the contrary, order their lives in accordance with a host of unformulated precepts, of which the only distinct one is, 'Thou shalt not scuttle the ship.' But the ship is scuttled; it is sinking fast; and what is curious is that its infatuated crew invariably fall tooth and nail upon any one of their number who attempts to work the pumps."

In support of this assertion the writer proceeded to adduce what he called a few notorious examples; notably that of a statesman of high rank, the head of an ancient family and possessed of great wealth, who had recently ranged himself

upon the popular, or at all events the Radical, side with reference to a burning question. "A year ago this man might have been cited as one who had the whole fashionable world at his feet; it is now, I am assured, no very easy matter to get a dozen people to meet him at dinner.

"So much for the politico-social aspect of the case; let us now glance at it from a purely social point of view. I am acquainted with a certain young scion of a noble house who, when he was some years younger than he now is, secretly married a woman of the people. There was nothing to be said against this woman, who was quiet, respectable, and fairly well-educated; but he either tired of her or recognized the fact that he could not acknowledge her without losing caste. Accordingly, soon after his marriage he turned his back upon her, making her a small annual allowance, and thenceforward calmly ignored her existence. The woman kept her own

counsel until the day of her death, which occurred not long since, after a protracted illness. Her husband was doubtless aware of her condition; for it is within my knowledge that some months before he became a widower he was paying his addresses to one lady who, as it happened, did not accept them, and that he then began to lay siege to the heart of another, with whom it may be hoped for her own sake that he will be equally unsuccessful."

The reader was then invited to contrast the cynicism of the husband with the uncomplaining heroism of the wife. The latter, having been duly married, had obeyed one of the laws insisted upon by her class, and had been, if not contented, at least resigned to her fate. The former, by deserting his wife, had obeyed one of the laws insisted upon by his class; and it was certain that from that class, as a whole, he would incur no censure for acting as he had done. The theme was amplified at considerable length, and various deductions

were drawn from it which are perhaps scarcely worth reproducing.

It was not Lord Walter's fault that he missed the point of this essay. Never having heard of Bessie Green, and not recognizing a portrait of himself in the unscrupulous husband alluded to, he paid little attention to the anecdote beyond an amused wonder whether Mr. Morley habitually indulged in such personal illustrations, and whether, if so, he would not some day get his head broken. The remainder of the composition did not interest him, such of its views as were not borrowed from other sources being for the most part foolish and incoherent; and he tossed "The Dry-Rot of Civilization" aside with a muttered criticism to the effect that if the first word of the title could not fairly be applied to the author's style, the second described his ideas accurately enough.

And so, although he remembered to take the *Omniscient Review* to the station with

him the next day, he would probably have made no remark upon Mr. Morley's contribution (having more important things to think about) if Norma had not at once asked him his opinion of it.

"Oh, it is rubbish," he replied, with a shrug of his shoulders. "If the lower classes are predominant in England, it is by virtue of their numbers. As for their standard of morality being higher than ours, I should think you must be as well aware as anybody that it is not."

"Still I think he is right in saying that their ideas of duty are more simple and definite than ours. Of course single instances prove nothing; but he gave one which struck me as being to some extent typical."

"Do you mean the 'scion of a noble house' who espoused the lowly damsel and immediately found out what a mistake he had made? I confess that I rather sympathize with that unlucky scion. I can find it in my heart to forgive him for pension-

ing off an impossible wife; and I fancy that if Mr. Morley had pursued his inquiries a little further, he would have discovered that she was just as glad to be rid of him as he was to be rid of her."

This was not a happy speech. It sounded—or at any rate so Norma thought—very much as though the speaker was not unacquainted with the circumstances. Nor was his next observation any more fortunate; for when she said, "At least you will admit that it was disgusting of him to begin making love to somebody else while his wife was still alive," he replied, with a laugh, "It certainly doesn't sound pretty; but as he knew that the woman was bound to die before long, it was perhaps natural enough that he should anticipate the date of his release a little."

Norma turned away. "Evidently," said she, in accents of cold displeasure, "Mr. Morley was not far wrong in assuming that the man would meet with no severe censure in his own class."

She at once began to talk to one of the other men who had gathered round the railway-carriage near which she was standing; and after that Walter could get no further speech of her. He did not in the least understand what had brought about this sudden change of manner. He was sorry that he had spoken so flippantly upon a subject which she apparently regarded in a more serious light than he did; but it seemed to him absurd and in no way characteristic of her that she should desire, at that last moment, to punish him so severely for a careless word or two. He could only suppose that he must have unintentionally affronted her in some other way, and he would have asked her what he had done if she had given him the chance.

However, she did not give him the chance. She had plenty of friends at hand to occupy her attention during the few minutes that remained to her. There was Grey, with an enormous bouquet ("Why

didn't I bring a bouquet?" thought Walter, in some vexation), and there were various other diplomatists, British and foreign, young and old, besides a goodly contingent of birds of passage, some of whom were leaving by the same train. Norma had a kindly word for each and all of them; only to Walter she had nothing to say except "Good-bye;" and even that was interpolated hastily into the middle of a sentence addressed to the obtrusive Grey, who was writing down the number of the house in Upper Belgrave Street upon his shirt-cuff.

The engine whistled; the train began to move. "Good-bye, Sinclair; don't forget to look us up when you come home," shouted Mr. Shafto out of the window. And so Walter was left to regret that he had not made his adieux on the previous evening, when, for some reason which he was unable to divine, he had stood higher in Norma's favour than he did now.

He walked away with Mr. Grey, who was pleased to speak of Miss Shafto in

flattering terms. "One of the nicest girls I have ever met in my life. Tremendously good and all that sort of thing; but not a bit of a stick—enjoys a joke as much as anybody. I shall miss her awfully."

"So shall I," observed Walter absently.

His companion glanced at him and began to laugh. "Why don't you go after her then?" he asked. "You're a free man; you aren't tied by the leg, like us poor devils. Now I'll tell you something that will make you look a little less dismal. Miss Shafto won't be angry if you follow her to Venice. The benevolent interest which I take in you, my dear Sinclair, has led me to talk to her about you more than once, and I am in a position to inform you that she won't stand hearing you criticized, even by a benevolent friend."

CHAPTER V.

AT THE LIDO.

To set traps for vermin is absolutely necessary; but one rather deplores the necessity, and wishes that they would be good enough to come out into the open and be killed in a more sportsmanlike way. The setting of traps, whether actual or metaphorical, is a practice to which no fair-minded person can have recourse without some compunction; and Norma, as soon as she had taken her last look at Walter Sinclair's grave face, began to reproach herself for having given him that article to read. It would have been more to the purpose if she had reproached herself for having assumed upon such very insufficient evidence that he had fallen into

the trap; but this view of the case did not suggest itself to her. She had hoped and expected that he would unhesitatingly condemn the conduct of Mr. Morley's supposititious "scion of a noble house:" she did not see that a guilty man would have been at least as likely to do that as an innocent one; nor did she count it as a point in his favour that he had alluded to the story without the smallest self-consciousness or embarrassment. This only struck her as an additional proof of callousness. To Madge she had stoutly maintained his innocence, and was prepared to continue doing so; nevertheless, she was now inwardly convinced of his guilt, and only regretted that she had reached that conviction by somewhat equivocal means.

Now one cannot always help knowing of circumstances discreditable to one's neighbours; but one can very well help looking as though one knew of them, and perhaps the best way of achieving that quasi-unconsciousness is to think about the

offenders as little as possible. Facilities for oblivion were afforded to Norma by change of scene. She and her father journeyed northwards as they had journeyed southwards, taking things very easily and enjoying to the full what most of us, unhappily for ourselves, have learnt to think a great nuisance. They halted in the old Umbrian cities where so few travellers now find time to pause; they had two days at Bologna and a day at Padua, and, as Mr. Shafto had given instructions that his letters were to be sent to Venice, nothing occurred to disturb the happy humour in which he had started upon this pleasure-trip.

With Venice itself Norma was enchanted, as indeed any one must be who has the good sense or the good fortune to visit the Queen of the Adriatic at the right time of the year and in fine weather. Venice can look dismal enough when a bitter wind is sweeping in from the sea or when the clouds return after the rain, as they have

an unfortunate habit of doing south of the Alps; but in this glorious spring-time it seemed as if sunshine and warmth could never cease and as if no other place in the world could be so delightful a place of abode for lazy people to whom the gratification of the senses suffices for happiness.

Norma was by no means a lazy person, and therefore perhaps appreciated all the more the pleasures of occasional laziness. She and her father agreed that it was too hot for sight-seeing. They hired a gondola and contentedly idled the hours away among the dark and narrow canals, which are so full of picturesque surprises, or out upon the wide, still lagoons, where the colouring of sky and water reconciles one to the affectation of that school of painters who have chosen to describe their productions in musical terms. And every evening after dinner they joined the throng which floated up the Grand Canal to the Rialto in the wake of the well-known boat-load of minstrels who have been singing

the same well-known airs and choruses for the last quarter of a century or more.

One evening, when Norma was mounting the staircase, after returning from this concert and saying good night to her father, who had gone off to the smoking-room with a friend, an English footman stepped forward, touched his hat to her, and handed her a card. The card was that of Lady Spencer Sinclair, and upon it was written in pencil: "Arrived this afternoon. So glad to find that you are still here. Will you look in before you go to bed?"

So Norma followed the footman into a sitting-room on the first floor, where she found the old lady reclining in a low chair by the open window and serenely contemplating the effect of moonlight upon the dome of Santa Maria della Salute. Lady Spencer was most affectionate in her welcome.

"My dear child, I can't tell you how delighted I am to meet you again! I was afraid you might have left; and then I

should have regretted having made this *détour*. But now I shall look forward to a few pleasant days in Venice. How lovely it all is!"

Norma agreed that it was perfect.

"Then you won't be moving on yet awhile, I hope?" pursued Lady Spencer interrogatively. "You see, it makes all the difference to me whether I have friends in a place or not. As a general rule, when it is time for me to go home, I tear straight through to London like a Queen's messenger. There's very little enjoyment to be got out of climate or scenery or anything else unless one has some companion to share it with."

Norma's soft heart was immediately filled with pity for this favourite of fortune, who had everything that the world could give her and no one to think about but herself. "Yes," she said; "it must be very melancholy to travel all alone."

"Well, I'm not exactly alone this time," Lady Spencer confessed, "because I have

induced Walter to escort me; but a young man and an old woman seldom want to do the same things, and though he is very good and long-suffering, I am so afraid of boring him to death that I am obliged to be perpetually keeping out of his way. Your being here alters the case entirely."

Lord Walter's being there altered the case entirely in Norma's opinion. She guessed at once that his aunt had brought him to Venice for other purposes than that of escort duty, and her sympathy with Lady Spencer was proportionally diminished.

"He has now gone," continued the old lady complacently, "to seek out Mr. Shafto. We are in hopes of persuading you both to come and lunch with us at the Lido to-morrow."

It was thus that Lady Spencer gave evidence of her tactical skill. The proposed arrangement might have been negatived by Norma; but it was pretty sure to be consented to by Mr. Shafto, and it had seemed to her advisable that his

daughter should be removed from him by an innocent little stratagem while it was being broached.

The fact was that Norma would gladly have made an excuse if she could have thought of a plausible one; but she knew quite as well as Lady Spencer did that her father would have committed himself by that time; so she only said, "Thank you; we should like it very much."

And in truth, when Mr. Shafto joined her later in the evening, it appeared that everything had been satisfactorily settled. "Lady Spencer is going to send her servants and the luncheon on ahead, and we shall follow in our two gondolas. Perhaps," he added ingenuously, "it would be the most sociable plan for one of us to go with one of them."

"Of course it would," assented Norma promptly. "I will go with Lady Spencer."

"Well—if you think so," said Mr. Shafto, with a laugh. "I'm quite ready to obey any orders that I may receive."

Norma, for her part, was resolved that, whatever orders she might receive, she would not share a gondola with Walter Sinclair. It was not that she had any fear of his giving effect to his aunt's wishes by proposing to her—for she was as sure that he would not do that as she was that she had no intention of accepting him—but she was disinclined to be left alone in his company, dreading lest she should be led into saying something which she might afterwards be sorry for, and knowing that it would be difficult to help letting him see how low he had fallen in her esteem.

But Lady Spencer was not so clumsy as to make embarrassing suggestions, and, when she met her friends in the hall of the hotel the next morning, acquiesced without hesitation in the arrangement which was somewhat eagerly put forward by Norma. The latter had already shaken hands with Lord Walter. She was not called upon to enter into conversation with him; and it was in the sanguine expecta-

tion that she would be able to avoid any such necessity during the remainder of the day that she seated herself in the gondola beside the old lady who had designed this expedition for a purpose which was certain to be fulfilled.

For although, as many a careworn chaperon knows, it is no easy matter to keep a given young man and young woman apart, it is the simplest thing in the world to throw them together; and Lady Spencer, having the whole day before her, could very well afford to wait. Lady Spencer, moreover, was by temperament as well as by circumstances exempt from the cares whereby chaperons in general are liable to become worn out. She had, in a certain sense, set her heart upon marrying her nephew to Norma Shafto, and had accompanied him to Venice with a view to furthering his suit; but she was able to contemplate his possible failure with philosophy, knowing that there are more good fish in the sea than there are

fishermen to catch them. Meanwhile, she reclined upon the soft cushions under the striped awning—nowhere else in the world are there cushions so soft as those black leather ones with which Venetian gondolas are furnished—and enjoyed the long row out to the Lido and the society of her companion, which indeed she had always found pleasant and soothing. Also, on reaching her destination, she enjoyed the luncheon which had been despatched thither by her orders. This, it need hardly be said, was excellent and elicited the warm approval of Mr. Shafto, who, however, remarked that it was not good for him to be provided with such luxurious fare.

"You will make us discontented with our humble lot, Lady Spencer," said he. "When Norma and I start on excursions we either take a few sandwiches with us or rely upon local talent to see us through. The consequence is that we have more than once returned home smelling scandalously of garlic."

"The popular prejudice against garlic," answered Lady Spencer, who was really interested in culinary questions, "arises, like most popular prejudices, out of ignorance. A suspicion of garlic——"

But perhaps the remainder of her ladyship's dissertation, which was a lengthy one, may be omitted, as relatively unimportant. During the course of it she rose and gently drew Mr. Shafto out of the little restaurant in which the repast had been served to a shady verandah, where there were chairs and a table prepared for the coffee which was coming. Norma was preparing to follow, but was arrested by Lord Walter, who said—

"Shall we walk down to the beach, Miss Shafto? I have something that I want to tell you about."

"Yes?" answered Norma rather reluctantly. "Can't it be told here?"

"Not very comfortably. I won't keep you long; only I don't want to be interrupted before I have said my say. It will

be all over in about five minutes, I should think."

So she signified her assent and walked beside him to those shell-strewn sands where the bride of the old commercial republic whispers memories of bygone splendour to its overtaxed and underfed children. Was he going to make a confession? She hoped not, because she felt that it would be impossible even to pretend to any sympathy for him, and yet she was not desirous of setting herself up as his judge. At the bottom of her heart she did not think it in the least surprising that he should have been unable to live with Bessie Green, and she could well believe that, as he had hinted, the separation had not been less welcome to poor Bessie than to him. Only, if she were to be asked what she thought of his conduct as a whole, she would have to say some things which he certainly would not like. She was altogether unprepared for the confession that he did make, after a long

interval of silence, during which he had been abstractedly kicking pebbles into the sea.

"I know it will be no good," he began; "but perhaps, after all, it won't do me much harm to speak out. Anyhow, that is my aunt's view. She insisted upon my following you—indeed she almost dragged me here—to say what I never found the courage to say in Rome. I don't think you ever quite liked my declaring that I was mad when I fancied myself in love with Miss Wilton; but now I can explain to you what I meant by that. I must surely have been mad, since I didn't discover that it was you and not she whom I loved the whole time."

And, as Norma made no reply, but only gazed at him in unfeigned astonishment, and even, as it seemed to him, with a shade of disdain, he asked, "Do you believe that?"

"How can you expect me to believe it?" she returned. "It is absurd!"

"Oh, I don't dispute the absurdity of it. But it is true. As I can't understand it myself, I can't, of course, require of you that you should understand it—only so it is. I have never loved any one but you, and I never shall love any one but you. That is really all that I had to say—at any rate, for the present. It was better that you should know it; though I have very little hope that it will give you satisfaction to know it."

What surprised Norma and made her feel rather ashamed of herself was that it did give her satisfaction. She certainly did not believe that he had loved her at the time when he had been so eager to marry Madge, nor could she believe that even that bygone passion had been the first of his life; but she did believe that he loved her now, and she could not help being glad of it; though she told herself that such love was scarcely worth having. Meanwhile, he seemed to expect some answer; so she said—

"I knew Lady Spencer was anxious to make up a match between us; she told me so some time ago. But I felt sure that you were not thinking of such a thing. Otherwise I might have saved you the—the trouble of speaking to me in this way."

The young man smiled. "I should have taken the trouble in any case," he answered; "I suppose it doesn't make much difference that you have heard the truth now instead of a few weeks hence?"

"No; I can't say that it makes any difference at all. So I hope," she added, presently, "that you are mistaken in imagining it to be the truth."

Walter dug his heel into the sand and frowned. "It isn't a point upon which one is particularly likely to be mistaken," he remarked.

"I shouldn't have thought so if you hadn't proved to me that it is quite possible in your case."

"Well—I have laid myself open to that taunt, of course, and I am not going to

complain of it. There is no possible way of convincing you here and now that it is undeserved: all I can do is to trust to time."

"I didn't mean it for a taunt," said Norma quickly; "I only meant to remind you of what is certainly a fact. And I don't wish you to trust to time, please."

"But you can't help it, Miss Shafto. I know very well that you don't love me now; only, so long as you don't love somebody else, I shall not despair."

After remaining silent for a few minutes, Norma remarked, "That will be rather disagreeable for me."

"I hope not. I shall not be so inconsiderate or so silly as to persecute you. All I ask is to be allowed to come and see you sometimes in London, just as I should have done if we hadn't met here. May I do that?"

"Yes, if you like; only I think I ought to tell you that I can never do as you wish. I would very much rather that

you gave up thinking about it once for all."

To this he made no direct answer; but presently he said, "You didn't know that I loved you when we were in Rome? You didn't guess it?"

"No; why should I? It wasn't a very probable thing to happen."

"Well, then it was not on that account that you changed to me. Because, you know, you did change. During the last part of the time you were not friendly with me at all, and when I went to say good-bye to you at the station you would hardly look at me. Why was that?"

"I am sorry," answered Norma, "if I seemed unfriendly. I tried to avoid being very much with you because remarks had been made about my having gone so often to your studio, and—and because of what Lady Spencer said. That last day at the station I was a little disappointed and annoyed with you, I confess. I didn't like

the way you spoke about Mr. Morley's article."

"Oh, if that was all!"

Then he suddenly remembered one passage in the article which he had criticized after a fashion that had been distasteful to her; so he added, "I dare say I didn't do Mr. Morley justice; but he really was rather inconsequent. He based a whole series of the gravest conclusions upon an anecdote of which one only heard as much as it suited him to tell. I couldn't help feeling for the unfortunate man who was held up to obloquy; because, you see, I happen to know how easy it is to make the sort of mistake that he apparently made."

"Yes; you can sympathize with such mistakes and you can make them. I don't think I could do either. That is why I shall never care for you in the way that you wish—or think that you wish."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Walter, "do you suppose that any man can reach

my age without having been in love half a dozen times or more? One must call it being in love, because of the poverty of language; but surely it has been proved again and again that out of all these loves or fancies, or whatever name you may please to give to them, there is one, and only one, which is real and lasting. Doubt me by all means if you can't help it; you have a very good excuse for doubting me. But don't imagine that you can deprive me of hope. I shall go on hoping, and I shall go on trying to win your love, just as long as I know that it hasn't been given to any other man; and nothing that you can say or do will discourage me."

Thus a little fire was infused into a colloquy which had hitherto been singularly calm and reasonable. It ended, after all, as satisfactorily for Walter as he had ever expected that it would end; for Norma gave him the permission to go on trying which she could scarcely refuse, while warning him that his efforts would

certainly be unsuccessful. However, she had made up her mind that at least there should be no more trying in Venice, and that, if possible, she would persuade her father to leave that place the next day.

CHAPTER VI.

LORD LODDONDALE REAPPEARS.

Towards the end of May Mr. Shafto and his daughter installed themselves in that house in Upper Belgrave Street which was henceforth to be their home. Indeed it now presented something more of a homelike appearance, many familiar pieces of furniture having been transported thither from Brampton which Norma recognized with joy. Some time previously, her father had informed her in an off-hand way that he had thought it best to dispose of his effects down in the country, that Shearman had taken the greater part of them off his hands, and that it wasn't worth while to have the remainder sent up to London; so that she was duly grateful to him for having

prepared this little surprise for her. She had been grateful to him, too, for the promptitude with which he had left Venice at her request. Although she had not told him in so many words that she had refused Lord Walter, he had understood perfectly well what had taken place that afternoon at the Lido, and had been willing enough to escape from the possible importunities of Lady Spencer, who had not concealed from him the motive of her hospitality. He was sorry that that amiable lady had been disappointed; but his own disappointment was not very keen, because, as has been mentioned, he was in one of his sanguine moods at the time, and asked nothing better than to keep his daughter with him as long as she would stay.

Norma had no intention of leaving him; and she told him so when he laughed at the elaborate arrangements which she was making for the disposition of the rooms and the furniture. "One would think you

were going to spend the rest of your life here," he remarked; "whereas the probability is that your wedding-day will come before you know where you are."

"Everybody doesn't have a wedding-day," Norma returned, "and women don't exist for the sole purpose of getting married. Why should I wish to marry? I have you to look after, not to speak of my poor people, and I really do think that I should be a little bit missed if I were to go away."

Mr. Shafto said there wasn't much doubt about that. For a few days after his arrival in London he was as happy and contented as possible, pleased to be back in England again, pleased to meet all his old friends at the club and to have his rubber of whist in the afternoon, pleased more especially with his house and his daughter, and with the excellent little dinners provided for him. But very soon clouds began to show themselves upon the horizon, and it was with a grave and troubled face that he returned from his first visit to the

City, where he had had an interview with the great Lämmergeier.

The great Lämmergeier was himself in trouble at this time, certain splendid combinations of his having signally failed. The political situation, as he candidly confessed to his eager disciple, had falsified his anticipations. He had counted confidently upon the outbreak of a European war in the spring; and now, owing to one of those slips which will sometimes occur 'twixt the cup and the lip, there was not going to be war. This, though a blessing for humanity, was a very great nuisance for Baron Lämmergeier. It naturally made him a little short in the temper, and disinclined to sympathize with the petty misfortunes of so small a speculator as Mr. Shafto.

"Losses! My dear sir" (what he said was "Ma tear thir," for in moments of emotion he became very Hebraic in his pronunciation), "you are not the only man who has had losses. We must bear these

occasional reverses and be thankful that they are no worse."

But Mrs. Lämmergeier did not find her husband in a very thankful mood when he joined her after business hours, and Norma was made anxious by the recurrence of her father's fits of fretfulness.

"It is all nonsense—utter nonsense, you know!" he exclaimed abruptly one evening.

"What is nonsense?" Norma inquired.

"Why, this fancy of yours for being an old maid, and visiting the poor, and all that. Dear me! I suppose there's nothing to prevent a married woman from visiting the poor, if she wants to see them. I wish to Heaven you had married Sinclair! Well, well! of course, if you couldn't like him, you couldn't, and there's an end of it. But it's a great pity; and if anybody else turns up, I do hope you won't be in such a hurry to reject him. I can't tell you what a relief it would be to me to know that you were safely provided for."

Then he jumped up hastily and left the

room; for he did not want to tell her how terribly alarmed he had been by rumours which had reached his ears from other sources than that upon which he was wont to rely for information. The truth was that Baron Lämmergeier had had a narrow escape of shipwreck; and although he was believed to be in comparatively smooth water again, things had been whispered about him which are only said aloud about men who have actually suffered shipwreck —things which made poor Mr. Shafto shudder and robbed him of his sleep at nights.

But of this Norma knew nothing, not being much in the way of hearing about such matters and not having yet seen Mrs. Lämmergeier, who had only left a card at the door, without coming in. This simple method of discharging social obligations (which is highly to be commended, and which, it may be hoped, will, as civilization advances, be further amplified by the employment of halfpenny postage-

stamps) has hardly been recognized out of London as yet; and Norma, who was accustomed to country ways, thought Mrs. Lämmergeier rather rude. However, another acquaintance, who was much less in the habit of paying calls than Mrs. Lämmergeier, showed himself more polite. This was Lord Loddondale, who presented himself one afternoon, looking remarkably bright and smart, and who shook Norma by the hand with such heartiness that she had difficulty in repressing a cry of anguish.

"My old aunt told me that you were home again," said he; "so, as I was in London, I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind my looking you up."

Norma declared that she felt greatly flattered. "You don't often pay your friends such a compliment, do you?" she asked.

"Well, no; not very often. But I'm rather thinking of turning over a new leaf now. You heard of my triumph, of course?"

Norma was obliged to confess that she had not; whereat he looked a little disappointed. Well, it was only that his colt had won the Derby. He had supposed that that was the sort of thing of which everybody would hear—just the name of the winner of the Derby! However, on second thoughts, perhaps it was rather ridiculous that people who had never been to Epsom or Newmarket in their lives should affect to be interested in one race more than another. And he hated sporting women; he was very glad that Miss Shafto wasn't a sporting woman.

"Walter has been having a triumph too," he remarked presently. "You'll have heard of that, at all events."

Once more Norma had to admit her ignorance. "The fact is that I have been nowhere and seen scarcely anybody since we came back," said she. "I have been very busy getting the house in order."

"But, good gracious me!" ejaculated Lord Loddondale, with wide open eyes,

"you don't mean to say that you haven't been to the Academy to see Walter's statue —the statue of yourself! Why, everybody in London is talking about it! And a rare good bit of work it is, too. Even I, who don't pretend to know much about these things, can understand that."

"I am very glad to hear that it has been a success," said Norma. "I quite hoped that it would be."

"Oh, it's no end of a success. But I can't understand your not having seen it—or him either." Lord Loddondale stroked his chin while he contemplated Norma with a puzzled expression of countenance. "Miss Shafto," he resumed abruptly, "you remember what I had the cheek to say to you at Monte Carlo. Would you mind telling me how things have gone? I couldn't get anything out of Walter."

"I don't mind your knowing," answered Norma; "only I would rather say no more about it after this; and of course you won't mention it to anybody, because Lord

Walter might not like it to be talked about. He did—very much to my surprise—ask me to marry him; but I couldn't accept him. I don't know," she added, "why you should have set your heart upon my becoming your sister-in-law; but, as you did, I should have been glad to have met your wishes, if that had been possible. Only, you see, it really wasn't possible."

Lord Loddondale received this bad news with more equanimity than might have been anticipated. "When a thing is really impossible, there's no good in going on wishing for it," was his sage remark. He added presently: "I suppose I mustn't ask why it is impossible?"

"You may ask; but I can't answer you," said Norma, with a smile. "If I were to ask you why you like racing, or why you don't like society, you couldn't answer me, could you?"

"Not very well," Lord Loddondale confessed. "I could give you reasons quite

easily; but I dare say you wouldn't call them good ones. If your reason for refusing Walter was that you didn't like him well enough to marry him, that's conclusive, and you couldn't give a better one. I only thought that perhaps there might have been another—I mean, you might have fancied that he wasn't quite free yet."

"How not free?" inquired Norma, with some curiosity; for this sounded very like an allusion to the story which Mr. Morley had been good enough to make public in the columns of the *Omniscent Review*.

But Lord Loddondale had never even heard of the *Omniscient Review*. "Well," he answered, "I saw in the newspapers that Sir Christopher and Lady Shearman had been in Rome, and I asked my old aunt whether she had come across them. She made the most hideous face you ever saw in your life, and said she had met them once and didn't want ever to meet them again. Now, Walter has always been my

aunt's favourite nephew; so I put two and two together, do you see, and I came to the conclusion that Lady Shearman had been trying on some of her old games again."

"Your brother is perfectly free from the feeling of attachment that he once had for Lady Shearman," answered Norma gravely. "He is particularly anxious that everybody should know that."

"Well, you know I always told you that he didn't care a bit about her. So there's no chance for him then? You've quite made up your mind against him?"

Norma nodded. "I have quite made up my mind. You will have to begin looking out for some other suitable person, if you are determined that he shall marry. But wouldn't it be a great deal better to look out for somebody for yourself?"

This was a suggestion which had very often been made to Lord Loddondale, and which had never hitherto failed to elicit an angry rejoinder from him. Now, however, he did not seem to be angry, but only

smiled and remarked, "Well, the fact is, I'm afraid I'm rather hard to please."

"But no doubt," said Norma, glad to have effected a change of subject, "you have a wide field for selection. You certainly ought to marry. Winning the Derby may be a proud achievement; but don't you think it is time for you to turn your attention to more humdrum successes than that? When one has such a place as Warbury, for instance, one shouldn't let it remain closed all the year round."

"Ah!" said Lord Loddondale musingly. And then, with a sigh, "Well, I don't know, I'm sure. You're fond of that neighbourhood, I suppose?"

"Of course I am. I shall always think of it as home; though it will never be my home again."

"It might be. You might marry a Stourshire man, don't you see? I was awfully sorry when I heard that Mr. Shafto had sold Brampton; I knew it would be a blow for you. Upon my word,

it's disgusting to think of that little wretch of a Shearman woman taking your place!"

It was at this appropriate juncture that Lady Shearman was announced. A little wretch she might be; but she was a very pretty little wretch, and nobody could deny that she knew how to dress herself. She had now been for some weeks in London, where she had met with many old acquaintances, and had made a number of new ones. Already she was beginning to acquire that *aplomb* and those agreeable manners which she had lacked in her younger days, and which have since made her not only popular but, in a restricted sense, celebrated. If she did not display much *aplomb* upon the present occasion, that was because it gave her a shock and a fright to find Lord Loddondale, of all people, in close confabulation with Norma, whom she had put off visiting from day to day by reason of the guilty conscience with which she was troubled. Lord Loddondale, for anything that she knew to the contrary,

might have been making revelations, and in the confusion of mind which a guilty conscience is apt to engender she did not realize that a revelation of the whole truth on his part would not necessarily compromise her at all. Therefore, while embracing her friend, she stammered and blundered incoherently; which signs of embarrassment Norma took to be merely expressions of penitence for remissness.

"Don't look so ashamed of yourself, Madge," said she, laughing; "one doesn't expect you fashionable people to be able to do as you please at this time of year; and I will forgive you for having neglected me. Come and sit down and tell me what you have been about."

Lord Loddondale jumped up, with a grunt, and said he must be off. "Perhaps you'll let me come and see you again, Miss Shafto. I should like to have another talk about—about what we were speaking of just now, you know."

"What was he speaking of just now?"

asked Madge inquisitively, as soon as the door closed behind him.

"Nobody who knew him would guess. I was strongly advising him to marry, and he seemed quite disposed to take my advice."

"Oh—I see," said Madge meditatively. "Yes; I suppose he will marry now."

"Why now more than at any previous time?" inquired Norma. And she wondered why Madge turned so red in explaining, "Oh, I only meant now that he has got his title and his property. He hasn't had them so very long, you know."

But after this little slip Madge soon recovered her presence of mind; for it was evident that Norma knew nothing. She began to chatter in a lively manner about the numerous entertainments at which she had been present, and which had apparently afforded her much enjoyment.

"London is a vast improvement upon Brampton," she said, "and Christopher—

well, Christopher is Christopher, and will remain Christopher, I suppose, to the end of the chapter. Still I may say that I take him in a diluted form here."

She dwelt at somewhat unnecessary length upon Sir Christopher's foibles; upon the trouble that she always had to get him to consent to the giving of ever so small a dinner-party; upon this, that, and the other. At variance with her custom, she asked no questions, and it was only when she was drawing on her gloves, preparatory to departing, that she remarked casually, "Of course you have been to admire yourself at the Academy?"

"No, indeed," answered Norma. "To tell you the truth, I didn't even know that I was there until Lord Loddondale told me about it just now."

"Didn't know that you were there!" echoed Madge. "Haven't you seen Lord Walter, then?"

"Not yet. I am not sure whether he has heard of our return."

To Madge this was satisfactory hearing, if a little puzzling. "Oh, he has heard that you are in London," she said; "because I met him the other day and we talked about you. He has blossomed out into a celebrity," she added. "It seems that, as a nation, we have been rather poor in sculptors up to now and that he is expected to raise us from our present humble position at the bottom of the class."

"I am so glad!" said Norma heartily. "I always hoped that he would distinguish himself."

Madge looked curiously at her and then began to talk about something else. It seemed clear that Norma did not intend to be Lady Walter Sinclair; but whether the chance of bearing that title had been offered to her she did not dare to ask.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. SHAFTO FINDS A SUBSTITUTE.

That a despised suitor is a great deal more likely to improve his position by a little wholesome neglect than by unwelcome attentions is a maxim of which everybody admits the truth, though very few think fit to put it into practice; and if Walter had wished to rouse Norma's interest and stimulate her curiosity, he would undoubtedly have been wise in holding aloof from her. In reality, he held aloof from her with no such astute design, but simply because he was afraid of being a nuisance. Nevertheless, the effect of his abstention was very much what might have been anticipated; and as day after day passed without his calling in Upper Belgrave

Street, she began to think and wonder about him far more than she would otherwise have done. Was he angry with her? She hoped not; for she sincerely wished to remain upon friendly terms with him, if that could be managed. Did he think that she would object to receiving him? She certainly had not meant him to think that. Or was it possible that he was now giving one more proof of his curious changeableness, and that he had already succeeded in ridding himself of an attachment which he had so recently declared to be unalterable? The latter hypothesis, being at once the most disagreeable and the most improbable, was naturally that which chiefly commended itself to her, and it must be owned that her vanity was a little wounded by it. On returning home one evening, however, she found his cards upon the hall table, so that she was able, after all, to acquit him of deliberate rudeness.

Mr. Shafto, whom she had chanced to encounter on the doorstep, glanced over

her shoulder at the cards and sighed heavily. "Ah, poor Sinclair! he might as well spare himself the trouble of calling here, I'm afraid."

"I should be sorry if he were to drop our acquaintance," said Norma.

"Well, of course it's for you to decide whether he shall do that or not. After all that has come and gone, I don't see how he is to be treated as an ordinary acquaintance."

"I can't treat him as anything else," said Norma decisively.

"Why not? What in the world would you have?' exclaimed Mr. Shafto, with a sudden outburst of irritability. "Do you know what you're throwing away? Do you know that that young fellow is going to be a great man? One may almost say that he is a great man already. Just one objection might have been brought against him, and now that has been removed, for everybody tells me that he is sure to make his fortune."

There was a dingy little room on the ground floor which Mr. Shafto used as his study. He had moved into it while he was speaking and now stood behind his writing-table, which was littered with stock and share lists, with financial newspapers, and with unopened circulars. "If only you were safely married to some decent man!" he sighed.

The light fell upon his face, and it seemed to Norma that he had all of a sudden become very old. His cheeks had fallen in; his rosy complexion had faded to a yellowish-gray colour; the lines about the mouth and eyes had deepened into furrows; the lower lip trembled. With a swift intuition she guessed what he was thinking of, and a pang of apprehension made her heart stand still.

"Papa," said she, "you are not well; you have been over-tiring yourself. Will you see the doctor, if I send for him?"

"Certainly not," answered Mr. Shafto sharply; "there's nothing the matter with

me; I'm as well as you are. I'm only worried—worried to death!" he added, with an abrupt change of tone, as he sank down in his chair and let his head drop upon his hand.

"Are things going badly?" Norma asked, after a moment's hesitation; for she knew how he disliked to be questioned about matters of business.

"Yes—no—I can't tell you. I don't know how things are going. That's the worry of it. I don't know how things are going—and Lämmergeier puts me off. I have trusted that man too much—trusted him too much!"

The last words were spoken in a whisper, and perhaps Mr. Shafto was hardly conscious of having uttered them; for he seemed surprised when Norma, who had seated herself upon the arm of his chair, began to reason with him gently, as if he had been a child. What, after all, was the use of money, except to bring ease?—and what ease could it bring to any one who was in

perpetual fear of losing it? If Baron Lämmergeier was not to be trusted, why go on trusting him?

"Who said he wasn't to be trusted?" returned Mr. Shafto, rousing himself from the reverie into which he had fallen. "You don't understand these things, Norma: you think, as all women do, that a man whose ventures prove unsuccessful is a thief. This happens to be an anxious time—for Lämmergeier, and for me, and for others. But it will pass, I dare say; many people think that it has passed already. Only, as I've told you before, it would make me feel more happy to know that you were married and provided for."

"I can't marry Lord Walter," said Norma; for she thought it best that there should be no misconception upon that point.

"Well, well!" returned Mr. Shafto wearily, "we must look out for a substitute then, I suppose."

And this became a fixed idea with him; so that in every man of suitable age and

means whom he encountered he saw a potential son-in-law. He took to bringing them home with him to luncheon or dinner, loading them with civilities, and looking anxiously at Norma while he drew out what he conceived to be their attractive qualities. What was distressing to her, although a little comical, was that they generally understood quite well what he was about, and that some of them (being highly eligible young men and therefore naturally shy) showed decided symptoms of alarm until she contrived to reassure them. One day, however, Mr. Shafto returned in triumph, having secured a prize who was more than eligible, yet apparently free from any timidity or reluctance.

"Is there any lunch going, Norma?" asked the old gentleman briskly. "I met Loddondale in the park just now, and he said he was thinking of paying you a visit, so I persuaded him to come back with me. We can offer him something in the way of food, I suppose?"

Lord Loddondale said a biscuit and a glass of sherry would do him perfectly well: during the hunting season he never swallowed more than that between breakfast and dinner. Besides, he hadn't come there to eat; he had come for the pleasure of seeing Miss Shafto. Indeed, it seemed as though he must have been saying a good deal about the pleasure that this would afford him to Miss Shafto's father, who rubbed his hands and looked delighted, as well as very knowing.

At first Norma was much relieved to find that, this time, she would only be called upon to entertain a guest whom there was no occasion to set at his ease; for she was very sure that Lord Loddondale did not, and never would, wish to marry her. But afterwards she became a little less certain of that. He did not, it is true, throw eloquent glances at her, nor did his voice change when he addressed her, nor did he behave in any way as lovers are wont to do; yet his manner was no longer quite

the same as it had previously been. He was very evidently anxious to suit his conversation to her tastes; he did his best to talk about many subjects of which he was entirely ignorant; and, upon the whole, it seemed by no means unlikely that, having made up his mind that he ought to marry somebody, he had fixed his choice upon a lady for whom he had always professed a Platonic admiration.

After luncheon he asked her what she was going to do. Had she been to the Academy yet? And, on hearing that she had not, he declared it was really too bad. "I should think I must have been there quite half a dozen times, though I don't know a painting from an oleograph. I'll tell you what, Mr. Shafto, I'll take you there this afternoon, both of you. Miss Shafto ought to see herself as others see her, and she won't have to go much beyond the turnstile. Walter's statue is the first thing you catch sight of after you've paid your shilling."

Mr. Shafto wasn't sure that he would have time: he had an appointment for half-past four which he must keep. As, however, it seemed that the carriage had been ordered at three o'clock and was already at the door, he ended by yielding to Lord Loddondale's entreaties, remarking, "Your brother might think us uncivil, perhaps, if we didn't take a look at his work."

And on the way towards Piccadilly he was at considerable pains to explain that posing as the original of this representation of Charity had been in itself an act of pure charity on Norma's part. "Between you and me, it was rather a bore for her; but she was glad to be of use—she is always putting herself out to be of use to somebody. She would have done as much for any other sculptor in Rome."

It is scarcely too much to say that no other sculptor in Rome could have turned her complaisance to such good account as Walter Sinclair had done. Others, no

doubt, might have conceived a design as simple and graceful; but only one who was profoundly in love with his model could have given to it that undefinable air of reality which may have been the secret of its success.

Sculpture cannot be called a popular branch of art in England, and one sometimes wonders whether the works of a modern Michael Angelo would attract much attention if exhibited in the Central Hall of the Royal Academy. Yet, incompetent critics as nine-tenths of us unquestionably are, we may venture to lay claim to a certain untutored instinct which seldom leads us astray. We often fail to admire what is worthy of admiration; but, on the other hand, we do not often applaud what is worthless. That year the British public had shown its capacity for occasional right judgment by emphatically approving of Lord Walter's statue; and the British public, as we all know, does not do things by halves. Norma had

to study the marble reproduction of the figure which was so familiar to her over the heads of a closely packed crowd, listening the while to comments which astonished her by their enthusiasm. At first she was a little afraid of being recognized; but apparently there was no ground for apprehension on that score, nor indeed, as she gazed, could she flatter herself that the likeness was one which would be detected by any chance bystander. It was her own face; but there was an exquisite, an almost divine beauty in it which her looking-glass had never revealed to her. She saw now what she had never seen in Rome, that it was a work of true genius. She was glad and proud, for Walter's sake, that it was so; and her heart beat with a mixture of joy and pain which she did not care to analyze at the thought that she was loved, or at least had been loved, by its author.

Can those who are capable of achieving really great things be also capable of committing mean and despicable actions? Of

course we all know that they can; but it is difficult to believe it when we are actually brought face to face with their achievements; and at that moment the absurdity of supposing that Walter Sinclair had deserted his wife, and, in anticipation of her death, had declared his love, while she was still living, for another woman, seemed to Norma manifest. Afterwards she remembered that his love for Madge had been genuine while it lasted, and that it had lasted a very short time; but just then she was ready to acquit him and to heap dust upon her own head.

From these musings she was roused by the voice of Lord Loddondale. "Well, Miss Shafto, it was worth coming to look at, wasn't it?"

"It is beautiful," answered Norma simply; "I didn't know how beautiful it was."

"Awfully glad you like it," said Lord Loddondale as complacently as if a compliment had been paid to himself. "My own opinion is that if Walter lives to

be a hundred he'll never do anything better."

"I wonder who will buy it?" said Norma presently.

"Oh, it's bought already; and at a pretty stiff figure too, I can tell you."

"Really? Do you know who the purchaser is?"

Lord Loddondale nodded. "I've the best of reasons for knowing. Now, you mustn't imagine," he added presently, "that I gave a fancy price for it. I never give fancy prices for anything, and what's more, he wouldn't have taken a fancy price from me. In point of fact, I believe he rather hates me for having robbed him of it, as it is; but then he admits that he would have hated anybody who had robbed him of it. What I did was to find out how much other people were disposed to offer and bid a little above them. I haven't made a bad bargain, I'm told."

"I thought you didn't care for art in any shape or form," observed Norma, to

whom these mercenary details were a little distasteful.

"Can't say I do, as a general thing. But I care for that statue, and I was determined to have it."

If this emphatic assurance did not please Norma very much, it pleased her father beyond measure. Mr. Shafto was always given to jumping to conclusions; but a less impetuous person than he might have reached the conclusion which he had adopted upon such evidence as that. A man who, by his own confession, neither understands art nor loves it does not buy statues and pay long prices for them. No! there could be no doubt about it: that Norma might, if she pleased, be Marchioness of Loddondale was as plain as—as Lord Loddondale himself. Well, certainly he was not handsome; but what of that? A kind heart may surely be held to counterbalance red hair and a heavy rent-roll to atone for a snub nose.

In these comforting reflections Mr. Shafto

indulged as he followed his daughter and her escort into the first room, whither they had moved, and where they were conversing with animation while pretending to examine the pictures; but he could not indulge himself in that way long, nor could he help interrupting them, reluctant though he was to do so.

"I'm afraid my time's up," said he. "I'm sorry to hurry you away, Norma; but necessity has no law."

"Oh, I am quite ready to go," answered Norma. "I can come and see the pictures some other time, and I'm sure Lord Loddondale has had enough of art for one day."

Mr. Shafto was not dissatisfied with the smile which she bestowed upon Lord Loddondale, nor with the manner in which she took leave of that converted misogynist at the foot of the staircase. His wishes must surely be obvious to her, and since she did not discourage him, it might fairly be assumed that he had found some favour in her sight.

"Good-bye, Loddondale, and I hope we shall see you again soon," said Mr. Shafto cordially, after he had put his daughter into her carriage; and then he hastened away to keep his appointment, which for once did not take him to the City, but to a certain house in Mayfair, ornamented by a brass plate.

He gave his card to the servant who admitted him, and, after a few minutes' delay, was shown into a study, where a grave-looking, elderly man was seated, writing.

"How do you do, Sir William?" began Mr. Shafto, in a hurried, half-apologetic fashion. "I rather wanted to consult you —not that there's much the matter; only I have some symptoms that I don't quite understand. Merely indigestion, I dare say you'll tell me; still one likes to be on the safe side, so I thought I'd just ask your opinion," etc., etc.

The grave-looking man waited quietly until his visitor had done; perhaps he was

not unaccustomed to preliminary statements of this unnecessary character. Then he asked a few questions. "What is your age? Do you ever suffer from so-and-so and so-and-so? Can you sleep pretty well?" To all of which queries Mr. Shafto was able to make replies which sounded satisfactory.

"I should like to listen to your heart, please," said the doctor; and, having made a brief examination, he sat down and scribbled off a prescription. "Well, Mr. Shafto," said he, "I think you will have to bear in mind that you are no longer as young as you once were. Avoid over-fatigue, and, if possible, emotion of any kind. I have ordered you a tonic, which I hope may do you some good."

"In point of fact, there's nothing amiss with me, except old age, eh?" said Mr. Shafto.

"Nothing else—at present," replied the other, with a slight smile. "Thank you. Good day."

Well, this seemed to be tolerably reassuring; but just as Mr. Shafto reached the door it struck him that the doctor had laid some emphasis upon the words "at present." He paused, and then took a few steps back into the room. "Excuse me, Sir William," said he; "I know you great men hate committing yourselves; still, if I am near my end, I would rather be told so."

"I certainly should not be justified in telling you so, Mr. Shafto."

"Nevertheless, you think it would be prudent of me to set my affairs in order."

The doctor smiled once more.

"At your time of life, that is always a prudent thing to do," he replied. "I may venture to say so much as that without any reference to your present state of health. If the symptoms which you mentioned become more troublesome, perhaps you will let me see you again."

Now these symptoms were really very trifling—an occasional feeling of oppression

and lassitude, a buzzing in the ears, a numbness of the hands and feet at times: one need not imagine one's self threatened with a stroke of paralysis because one experiences such common sensations as these. Yet Mr. Shafto as he walked away knew that he had had a serious warning. The doctor had not said much; but then he had left a good deal unsaid—a good deal which he assuredly would have said if he had wished to dissipate the fears which he must have known very well that his patient entertained.

"And he distinctly advised me to put my affairs in order," mused Mr. Shafto. "Ah! if I could act upon that advice it would do me a great deal more good than his tonic. Well, supposing that I live a few more months—who knows? Meanwhile, the first thing—the great thing—is to get Norma married. Once that's done, it will matter little enough what becomes of me."

CHAPTER VIII.

NORMA MAKES A GREAT DEAL OF MONEY.

The craftiest and most successful of living statesmen is commonly believed to have paved the way for his triumphs by the unusual expedient of frankly and bluntly stating his aims. In his case the frankness and bluntness have perhaps been somewhat more apparent than real; still there is, no doubt, much to be said in favour of a method which puzzles everybody, and it is possible that Mr. Shafto, in declaring and reiterating his desire that Norma should become the wife of Lord Loddondale, was less clumsy than most people would have pronounced him to be. At any rate, he did not arouse opposition by this system of

tactics, which is more than can be said for the general run of tacticians.

It is true that he had to deal with one whose most earnest wish was to gratify him. Norma saw only too plainly that her father was fretting himself into an illness; she noticed that his eyes brightened and that his spirits and appetite improved every time that Lord Loddondale came to the house; and to deprive him of the one hope which seemed to sustain him in this time of anxiety was an act of cruelty to which she could not bring herself. It was a time of great anxiety for her as well as for him; for although he only alluded in vague terms to the pecuniary disaster which he dreaded, she understood—and in truth he meant her to understand—that he was threatened with something like absolute ruin. Thus she was exposed to the danger of being at any moment called upon to decide whether she would accept Lord Loddondale or reject him. At first she had hoped that that somewhat eccentric

young nobleman did not really entertain the sentiments attributed to him and that his daily visits might be due partly to a friendly feeling and partly to a secret determination to carry out the project which he had broached to her at Monte Carlo and which he might not yet have abandoned, in spite of his apparent failure. The kindliness and admiration with which he always spoke of his brother seemed to lend some countenance to this theory. But she was soon compelled to relinquish it. It could not be said that he made love to her in the ordinary acceptation of that phrase; but he intimated his intentions in language which was perhaps more unequivocal than he intended it to be.

"I've quite made up my mind to act upon your advice, Miss Shafto," he informed her; "I'm going to marry, and I'm going to do my duty to the Stourshire people, if I can. Only it doesn't altogether depend upon me, does it? I shall have to get

somebody else's consent before I can bring that event off."

And on being asked whether he had yet fixed his choice upon any person in particular, he laughed and replied, "I'll tell you that a little later on; and when I tell you, you'll understand why I didn't take you into my confidence sooner. But one thing I can promise you, Miss Shafto: my wife will be a person whom you'll approve of, or she'll never be my wife at all."

It was impossible to misinterpret speeches of this kind, and all Norma could do was to affect an unconsciousness which she trusted would stave off the evil day. She did not at all like doing this; it seemed to her, and perhaps it was, a little dishonest; she had never been in the habit of staving off evil days or trying to shut her eyes to the necessary consequences of her own actions. And so it came to pass that she accustomed herself more and more to the idea of eventually marrying a man whom she did not love, but for whom she had a

sincere liking. That is an idea to which doubtless a very great number of women can accustom themselves without serious unhappiness. That Norma could not do so was her misfortune: sometimes she was inclined to think that it was also her fault.

Meanwhile, she had resumed all the avocations which she had taken upon herself before leaving England, so that she had not a great deal of time to devote to self-examination. As formerly, the denizens of certain unfashionable districts claimed her attention; the excellent, hard-working, but amusingly self-satisfied gentlemen who represented the Anglican priesthood in those districts did not fail to remind her that a long holiday is a very dangerous thing, unless it sends us back to our labours with recuperated energies; also it appeared that she was badly wanted at the Hall of Recreation. The Hall of Recreation, like a great many other meritorious institutions, had been outrunning the constable, and those who were responsible for its

debts had decided, as responsible persons usually do under such circumstances, that money must be extracted from the public by the time-honoured but always effectual expedient of a bazaar.

"Nobody can abhor bazaars more than I do," sighed Lady Adelaide Tomkinson; "but what is one to do when one's friends are so horribly stingy? If they would only believe it, it would pay them a great deal better to hand us over ten or twenty pounds apiece at once, besides saving themselves and us an infinity of trouble. But it is useless to tell them that; and the Duke of Brentford has kindly lent us his riding-school; and the committee think that you had better take the flower-stall, Miss Shafto."

In point of fact, the committee had based their decision upon the specified ground that, for obvious reasons, the sale of button-holes ought to be intrusted to the best-looking woman; but this Lady Adelaide did not mention, because it is so wrong to

flatter young people's vanity. Added to which, she had had the misfortune to differ from the committee; for she had fully intended to sell the buttonholes herself.

The honour conferred upon her was not one which Norma greatly coveted, being doubtful whether she possessed the especial gifts of fascination which induce young men to give five guineas for a rose. However, when the time came, she very soon found that no unusual exertions would be required of her after all. The very first person to enter the building, after the doors were opened, was Lord Loddondale, who chose his bouquet, had it pinned into his coat and laid down a ten-pound note by way of payment. This was a noble act (and, it may be added, a wholly unprecedented one on his lordship's part); but his benevolence and helpfulness by no means ended there. He now stationed himself in the gangway, and from that moment he suffered no man, young or old, married or single, to pass on undecorated.

His method was short, sharp, and decisive. "You want a buttonhole, I suppose? Very well; only make haste, please, because you're preventing other people from coming in. There's no price. Pay what you please; but we can't give change."

One or two elderly gentlemen had the hardihood to say that if they couldn't have change they would do without a buttonhole, and these were thrown into deep confusion by receiving their flowers gratis; but the majority paid sovereigns and half-sovereigns cheerfully or grudgingly, and it was all that Norma could do to keep pace with the demands made upon her. Upon the whole, she enjoyed herself. A great many celebrated and distinguished personages, some of whom were introduced to her by Lord Loddondale, while some she recognized from having seen their photographs so often, presented themselves at the counter behind which she stood; and if their remarks were hardly such as she could make a mental note of and recall

with interest in after-life, they were at all events pleasant and complimentary. Every now and then some of her acquaintances appeared and were swept on, like straws upon the surface of a stream. Madge Shearman, for example, came within the field of her vision in this way and passed out of it again, smiling, nodding, and making helpless gestures; but Sir Christopher, who purchased a pink carnation, shook her by the hand and was very cordial.

"Why have you never been to see us, Miss Shafto? Won't you come and dine, and hear all the Brampton news? I must ask Madge when we have a free evening. She's having a rare benefit now, I can tell you! You won't be able to accuse me of making her lead a dull life any more."

Next came Baron Lämmergeier, who was already provided with a sprig of stephanotis, but who plucked out this exotic and trampled it underfoot as he approached. He congratulated her upon her "thplendid thuctheth," saying that he

was sure she must have collected enough to supply recreation to a dozen parishes. Might he be allowed to contribute his mite to so admirable an object? And out came a bank-note, which was somewhat ostentatiously upheld for a moment or two before it descended into Norma's open palm. His wife contributed nothing, except a hasty bow. Mrs. Lämmergeier was evidently not anxious to speak to her former friend, and Norma wondered why. But she had not much leisure for wondering; otherwise she might perhaps have wondered more than she did why, in a crowd which seemed to comprise the whole society of London, Walter Sinclair should have remained conspicuous by his absence. She was beginning to feel very tired when old Nell Travers hove in sight and greeted her effusively.

"Let me into that sentry-box of yours," Miss Travers said, "and I'll give you a helping hand. Don't I realize your motion of a *jolie bouquetière?* Never mind! I

won't thrust myself forward; but I can hand you the flowers as you want them, and suggest neat speeches to you in a whisper. I have an immense stock of them on hand, which are quite at your service, being of no value to the author."

Accordingly she perched herself upon a high stool at Norma's elbow and entertained her with a running commentary upon the passers-by. Also she had a good deal to say about sundry old friends. The Shearmans were getting on very well—very well indeed. Madge was in a fair way to take rank as a professional beauty, and what was much more surprising than that, she really appeared to have tamed her unmanageable husband.

"I didn't think she had it in her; but so it is. He snaps and snarls at her occasionally, and then she makes him go down on his knees and lick the ground. Mark my words; that young woman has a career before her. And, talking of careers, what do you think of Walter Sinclair's

coming out as the rising sculptor of the day? I'm free to confess that I didn't think he had it in him either; though I suppose you did. He owes his fame to you, my dear, and I suspect that nobody knows that better than he does. By the way, where is he? I thought I should have met him here."

"I haven't seen him," answered Norma. "Perhaps he isn't very fond of bazaars."

"Small blame to him! But he ought to be here, whether he likes it or not. Didn't he tell you that he was coming?"

Norma had to confess that he had had no opportunity of so doing; whereat Miss Travers raised her eyebrows. Miss Travers, in fact, had heard certain rumours, and was in her present position chiefly for the purpose of satisfying herself as to their truth. She said nothing more upon the subject, but kept a vigilant eye upon the entrance until she caught sight of the figure for which she had been looking out. Then she slipped quietly off her stool, and,

passing round to the front of the stall, took Lord Loddondale by the arm.

"Come along and show me Mrs. Jarley's Wax-works," said she.

"Eh?—wax-works?" returned Lord Loddondale, who was not desirous of quitting his post. "There aren't any wax-works, are there?"

"I should think there were; but really I don't know, and what's more, I don't care. Come and show me something else—anything else. It is for your sake that I make this request. You have been standing here quite long enough, and you require a change."

"Don't play the fool, Nell," remonstrated Lord Loddondale; "what do you want?"

"If you must needs know, I want to ask you your intentions; and how can you answer me unless we withdraw a little from the madding crowd? Are you aware that you have been seriously compromising Norma Shafto by your extraordinary behaviour this afternoon?"

During this colloquy, which resulted in the withdrawal of Lord Loddondale from the scene, Walter Sinclair had approached Norma's stall. The afternoon was now far advanced; the building was thronged, but arrivals had ceased, and he could talk to her without much risk of being interrupted.

"I hope the statuette reached you safely," he said, after a few commonplaces had been interchanged.

"Yes; and thank you a thousand times for it," she answered, glad that he had introduced that subject. "I have been to see the original too, and I wanted to tell you how delighted I was with it. Of course you have been complimented by people whose good opinion is much better worth having than mine; still I can't help adding my humble voice to the chorus. Don't you feel very proud?"

He smiled, and refrained from making an obvious rejoinder. She knew that he loved her, and must be perfectly well aware that her praise was sweeter to him

than the applause of a hundred critics. For the present, that was enough; so he only answered, "Success is always pleasant, I suppose; but one swallow doesn't make a summer. That is the most important thing for me to bear in mind just now."

"I shouldn't have thought so," she returned; "I should have thought that the most important thing for you was to have confidence in yourself. Surely that is half the battle."

Again he had to put a curb upon his inclinations; for he would have liked to ask her whether that rule was of universal application, and whether, supposing that there was something which he desired far more ardently than fame or fortune, self-confidence would stand him in better stead than patience and humility. For his own part, he had decided to adopt quite another system of strategy. He thought—and perhaps he was right—that what she required to be convinced of was, not that he

loved her, but that his love was of an enduring quality; he had promised that he would not persecute her, and he meant to keep his promise. Only of course it was a little difficult to steer a straight course between friendship and love, to make her understand that he had not changed, and yet that he could patiently submit to be banished from her society, if she so willed it. She seemed to think that his delay in calling in Upper Belgrave Street had been due to other engagements; so that he was obliged to explain how little disposed he felt for going out into the world, and that he had been refusing all invitations. Thereupon her manner at once became more reserved. She began to talk about the bazaar and the unexpectedly large take that she had achieved.

"Principally through your brother's exertions," she added. "If it hadn't been for him, we should have been at least a hundred pounds poorer than we are. The whole afternoon he has been standing

where you are now and simply ordering people to buy flowers of me. Shameless; but effective."

"Loddondale at a bazaar!" ejaculated Walter incredulously; "I should as soon have expected to hear of his handing an alms-bag in church. What can have induced him to do such an amazing thing!"

At this juncture Lord Loddondale appeared, to answer the question in person. He clapped his brother on the shoulder and said, "Now then, Walter, where's your buttonhole? You need me to look after your customers for you, Miss Shafto, I see."

Walter laid down a sovereign and received a rather faded rose in exchange for it. He lingered for a time beside the stall, listening with wonder and growing disquietude to the familiar conversation which ensued between his brother and Norma; then he strolled on and allowed himself to be plundered until the hour of

closing arrived. Lord Loddondale was still leaning over the counter when he returned; but now everybody was going away, and presently Norma withdrew to deliver up the contents of her overflowing till to Lady Adelaide Tomkinson, after warmly thanking her coadjutor and bidding him good-bye.

"Which way are you going, Walter?" asked Lord Loddondale, when the two brothers were left together.

"I don't much care," answered Walter absently. "To St. James's Street, I think. I'll go with you, if you're walking." And they had not proceeded many yards along Piccadilly before he asked, with some abruptness, "Have you changed your mind about Miss Shafto, Loddondale? You told me once that you wanted me to marry her, but that you had no idea of marrying her yourself."

Lord Loddondale nodded. "Quite right. I told you so, and I meant it at the time; but the truth is that circumstances have

occurred since then which have given me a freer hand. I needn't enter into them; they concern nobody but myself. I'm glad you have asked me the question, though; because I shouldn't wish to enter myself against you if—if, in fact, you were not rather a doubtful starter. But——"

"But the pen has gone through my name," suggested Walter, with a faint smile.

"Exactly so," said Lord Loddondale, who had been somewhat hampered by his promise not to mention that he had heard of Walter's rejection. "If you admit that, there's no reason why I shouldn't try my chance, I suppose."

"None whatever," answered Walter; "there wouldn't have been any from the first."

"I won't quite say that. I told Miss Shafto, when I met her at Monte Carlo last winter, that I asked nothing better than to have her for my sister-in-law, but since it seems that that can't be—why, I

shall be a proud and happy man if she'll consent to be my wife."

Walter could not help laughing. "You're a queer sort of lover, Loddondale," he remarked.

"Oh, I'm not exactly what you would call a lover at all," answered the other composedly; "that sort of thing is out of my line. The way I look at it is this: everybody says I ought to marry, and I suppose everybody is right. Well, if I do marry, it will have to be Miss Shafto. I'm perfectly certain that I couldn't stand living in the house with any other woman I have ever met."

"I think I ought to tell you," said Walter, after a pause, "that I haven't given up hope yet. I have been refused, and I don't mean to offer myself again for some time to come, because I know it would be useless. But if Miss Shafto rejects you, I shall certainly make another attempt."

"You'll have my best wishes, old

man," returned Lord Loddondale good-humouredly; "but just at the present moment it looks to me as if my chance was a better one than yours. I'll let you know how I prosper."

CHAPTER IX.

LORD LODDONDALE'S CHANCE.

Nobody, perhaps, is a very good judge of the woman whom he loves. As a matter of course, he ascribes to her virtues which she may or may not possess; but he seldom gives her credit for much discrimination, or doubts the possibility of her becoming attached to a man with whom she has nothing at all in common. If Walter Sinclair had not been in love with Norma, he would probably have seen that his brother could not, in the nature of things, stand the smallest chance of winning her affections. As it was, he only said to himself, as so many have said before him, and will continue to say to the end of time, that it was very extraordinary, that women

were incomprehensible, and so forth. Loddondale was a good fellow, a much better fellow than most people supposed, and it would be doing him a great injustice to say that he was unworthy of a good woman's love; but that Norma Shafto could ever be happy as his wife seemed almost inconceivable. However, if she thought differently, there was nothing more to be said, nor anything to be done. He could only await the issue with such patience as he had at command; and in the mean time he made no attempt to see her. Until this question was settled, one way or the other, he felt that he could not trust himself in her presence.

Unhappy and apprehensive as he was, he would have been a great deal more so had he known the true state of the case. Assuming that there is nothing wrong in marriage without love (and that, after all, is an assumption upon which the majority of civilized nations act), Norma had every reason for accepting the offer which, as she

could no longer doubt, Lord Loddondale intended to make. His mixture of shrewdness and simplicity, his genuine kindness of heart and sincerity—these and other attributes made up a character which she liked and had no difficulty in understanding. She was inclined to think that she ought to marry him, if he wished it, and to be impatient with herself for the extreme repugnance which she felt to the idea of so doing. All her life long she had been accustomed to think more about the happiness of others than about her own: why should she hesitate now to make her father and Lord Loddondale happy by what, after all, ought not to be any very great personal sacrifice? "It isn't as if I cared for anybody else," she thought. Thus she brought herself to that perilous condition of mind in which decision is apt to be the result of circumstances; and Lord Loddondale, without knowing it, played his cards skilfully when he invited Mr. and Miss Shafto to spend the Ascot week with him

in the little house on the outskirts of Windsor Forest which he had hired for that meeting.

The invitation was immediately and eagerly accepted by Mr. Shafto; although our old friend Mr. Winstanley-Pettie, whom he met at the club, and to whom he incidentally mentioned it, thought fit to give him a kindly word of warning.

"Going down to Ascot to stay with Loddondale — and going to take your daughter! My dear Mr. Shafto, if you'll excuse my saying so, I really think you had better not. The sort of people whom Loddondale has with him on these occasions are—well, not quite the sort of people whom you would like your daughter to be seen with, I imagine."

"I am quite sure," replied Mr. Shafto, with dignity, "that Loddondale would never dream of asking my daughter to meet anybody to whom I could object."

And the event proved that his confidence was not misplaced; for when Norma and

her father reached the pretty little cottage in which they were to be entertained from Monday to Saturday, who should come tripping out of the drawing-room to welcome them but Lady Spencer Sinclair.

"I haven't been at Ascot since the Flood, and I certainly didn't expect ever to see the course again," Lady Spencer declared; "but my nephew made such a pathetic appeal to me that I couldn't refuse him. Let us hope that before this time next year he will have given somebody else a better right to do the honours for him."

It would have been difficult to speak more plainly; but, in order to avoid any possible misconception, Lady Spencer accompanied her words by a little nod and smile at Norma, who, remembering certain conversations at Rome, could hardly help laughing.

Yet the good lady was not inconsistent. Having made up her mind that Norma was a suitable person to be admitted into

the Sinclair family, she did not, individually, care which of her nephews made the suitable alliance. For the matter of that, it was a great deal more important that Loddondale should marry than that Walter should do so; and there was a directness about the proceedings of the elder brother which, to her mind, contrasted very favourably with the dilatoriness of the younger. She had therefore not only acceded to Lord Loddondale's wishes, but had been kind enough to select his party for him. It consisted of but few persons, all of whom were his relations; so that when Norma took her place at the dinner-table, she felt as though she were in the presence of a family council, assembled for the purpose of bestowing upon her a family benediction. That, perhaps, was exactly what Lady Spencer had intended her to feel.

"A nice lot of solemn fools I've asked you to meet, haven't I?" her host seized an early opportunity of remarking to her.

"I'm awfully sorry; but the fact of the matter is that it's my old aunt's doing. I said to her, 'Let's be respectable, whatever we are,' and she took me a shade too literally at my word. The only thing is that you needn't be bored with them, except in the evenings."

Lord Loddondale's guests were not fools, nor were they particularly solemn; although, since they were no longer young, and had never been addicted to that kind of hilarity which consists chiefly in breaking the furniture, they were a good deal quieter than his usual associates. Norma was not at all bored by them; only she would have liked, if it had been possible to do such a thing, to explain to them that she had not yet made up her mind to accept the honours with which she was threatened. An uncomfortable feeling that her mind had been made up for her and that she had insensibly advanced to a point from which retreat would be extremely difficult interfered a good deal with her

enjoyment during the first two days. But for that, a scene which happened to be entirely novel to her would have pleased her well enough. The weather was fine and warm; the drive to and from the course on Lord Loddondale's drag (there was a victoria for Lady Spencer, who offered the vacant seat in it to Mr. Shafto) lay through country which at that time of year might almost be called beautiful; and the fact that her host had horses in all the more important races gave her an interest in the sport which perhaps she might not otherwise have experienced. His own interest in it was so deep and unfeigned that she saw very little of him while the racing was going on; and notwithstanding the marked attention and deference with which he treated her at dinner and during the evenings, he did not, as a lover might have been expected to do, display any particular anxiety to draw her away from the rest of the company. Sometimes she had a faint hope

that Mr. Shafto and Lady Spencer and everybody might be mistaken, and that he only wished her to be his friend, after all.

The truth was that Lord Loddondale, being a cool-headed, methodical sort of person, had decided that he would not expose himself to the risk of being refused before the end of the week. He wanted Miss Shafto to enjoy the Cup Day, and this benevolent wish of his was gratified; for Norma, free from any immediate anxiety, was able to derive a good deal of pleasure from a scene which is always brilliant when the sun shines, despite certain deplorably inadequate attempts to make it so. He himself did not enjoy it quite as much as he might have done; because his horse, after having been made a hot favourite for the principal race, was beaten by a head, which caused the day to be an expensive one for him. However, he more than recouped himself by carrying off the Hardwicke Stakes on the Friday; so that on that evening he was

in good spirits, feeling that the omens were favourable.

After dinner Norma was sitting out in the garden with Lady Spencer and the other two ladies who made up the female proportion of the small house-party. It was warm and still, and her thoughts were far away at deserted Brampton, where the roses were wasting their sweetness upon the gardener and his subordinates. During the day she had met Sir Christopher and Madge, who had stated that they would be leaving London shortly and had begged her to pay them a visit. She was wondering whether she would like to return as a visitor to the old home which could never be her home again or whether it would not be better to preserve the memories that she had of it unimpaired by new associations. Her musings were not much disturbed by Lady Spencer's prattle or by the sound of the men's voices which came to her through the open windows of the dining-room, for it was

now tolerably evident, she thought, that Lord Loddondale did not mean on this occasion to declare his intentions, if indeed he had any.

Upon that point she was presently undeceived. A thin cloud of cigarette-smoke floated past her, and, turning her head, she became aware of her host, who had approached noiselessly across the lawn, and who was standing close to her elbow.

"Would you mind walking to the end of the shrubbery with me, Miss Shafto?" said he.

She rose without a word. She knew at once what was coming, but it was useless to attempt to shirk it. Lord Loddondale would certainly contrive to say, sooner or later, anything that he was determined to say; she only wished that she could feel the same certainty as to the reply which she would have to make to him. Meanwhile, she walked beside him in silence, while he led the way through clumps of

rhododendrons to a small plantation where there was a rustic bench. Here he halted, begged her to sit down, and deliberately seated himself when she had done so. "Miss Shafto," said he, "I want to ask you whether you can possibly see your way to doing such a thing as marrying me. You know pretty well by this time what I am—not much to look at, and not much to talk to. I know nothing about art or science and precious little about politics. Most ladies would tell you that my manners are atrocious and that I have a taste for low company. To set against all that, I have one or two good points. I've never been what anybody could call a vicious man; I'm not bad-tempered, nor jealous, nor sulky, and I stick to my word. If I tell you that I'll do any mortal thing in my power to make you happy, you may be sure I mean it."

Lord Loddondale paused for a moment before adding, "Then there's the position, which I suppose counts for something—

and the money. I'm not enormously rich; still I'm about as well off as most people care to be."

"Do you think those are sufficient inducements to hold out?" asked Norma, with a rather tremulous laugh.

"Ah, that's for you to say. I couldn't think of any others, or I'd have mentioned them. You see, Miss Shafto, I knew very well that if you consented to marry me it wouldn't be for love."

Norma felt the blood mounting into her cheeks. She had no right to take offence at that perfectly true statement; yet she thought that he might have been a little less blunt with her. "It isn't because you love me that you ask me to marry you," she remarked in a low voice.

"Well, I'm not so sure of that; I know you are the only woman in the world whom I would ask to marry me. I'm no great believer in what people call love; I had rather a sickener years ago, when I was a lad—but that's neither here nor there.

The question is whether you'll take me, such as I am?"

"I wonder at your wishing it! Surely it is rather strange that you should wish for a wife whom you only expect to take you for the sake of your position and your money!"

"Not so very, considering the circumstances. I don't want to pry into matters which perhaps you wouldn't care to talk about; but my notion is that you may have good reasons for marrying a man who has a certain amount of money. Well—here I am. You don't dislike me; and if you'll give me the right to be of use to you and take care of you—there's only one possible way of giving me that right, don't you see—you'll make me very happy and very grateful."

Norma gave a long sigh. "I can't!" she exclaimed suddenly. "I wanted to say yes—I thought you would ask me to be your wife, and I had almost decided that I would say yes; and I suppose you understand or guess it all. But it's impos-

sible. It's shameful and disgraceful, and I can't do it!"

Lord Loddondale had never seen her so agitated before, and he did not quite grasp her meaning. It was true that he had understood or guessed what might probably be her motives for accepting his offer; but these were not in his eyes shameful or disgraceful.

"I don't think you ought to marry me if you love another man," he said, after a few moments of grave reflection. "When you told me that you had refused Walter, I took it for granted that it was because you didn't care for him, and I looked upon him as out of the running, though he cares for you as much as ever. But if there was any other reason——"

"There was no other reason," interrupted Norma. "I could not care in that way for Lord Walter; because, from what I know of him, I don't think it is in him to care very much either for me or for anybody else."

"H'm!—well, it isn't my business to back him up, I suppose, though I think you are altogether wrong about him, and I may claim to know him as well as you do. But I was thinking that you might have rejected him on account of his poverty, and I want you to understand that he won't be poor. It's a positive fact that, unless I marry you, I shall never marry at all; so that Walter will be just as much my heir as if he were my son. Under the circumstances, I don't see how he can reasonably refuse to be treated as my heir."

"I never met any one like you, Lord Loddondale!" exclaimed Norma, half laughing, half crying. "You are wonderfully unselfish and generous; and yet, do you know, you are not very flattering to me. What makes you think that I am so eager for money?"

"Oh, I know you don't want it for yourself. I've heard things—old Nell Travers and others have told me—there's no occasion to repeat them all. Only it

may come to pass that, some day or other, you will need money badly, and then—well, then you know, Miss Shafto, it won't be a very pleasant thing for me to have to stand and look on and feel that I mustn't dare to offer any help to the person whom I care most for in the world."

Norma held out her hand to him in silence; but when he grasped it with an eager, questioning look, she shook her head. "No," she said; "it can't be. If I were to do such a thing you would not be able to help despising me, and you would be right. But I am very grateful to you—and I am very, very glad that you don't love me."

"But, as I told you, I'm not so sure of that."

"If you did love me you would be sure of it. I am thankful that it isn't so, because it would have made me very unhappy to disappoint you. As it is, I must disappoint others; there's no help for it."

She rose as she spoke; but Lord Loddondale remained seated for a few more seconds, stroking his chin meditatively. Then he too got up, and, while he lighted another cigarette, remarked—

"I'll tell you what, Miss Shafto, you had better leave this business to me. I'll make Mr. Shafto understand that the thing couldn't come off because I was so beastly exacting. 'Your daughter is willing to do anything in reason or out of reason to please you,' I shall say to him; 'but you don't expect her to tell lies, I hope. If she can't manage to fall in love with a man who's as ugly as sin, and if the ugly man won't marry her unless she falls in love with him—why, it's pretty clear who is to blame.' If that don't shut him up and make him ashamed of himself, I don't know what will."

Not many of us have the wit or the opportunity to form an accurate judgment of those with whom we habitually consort. A considerable number of people knew

Lord Loddondale intimately and some of them liked him; but they would one and all have laughed at the idea that there was anything approaching to magnanimity or Quixotry in his whole composition.

CHAPTER X.

"TO N. AND M."

LORD LODDONDALE was as good as his word. When the ladies had retired to bed, he had a brief conversation with Mr. Shafto, by means of which he managed to convince that aggrieved parent that Norma had been more sinned against than sinning. Nor did his generosity and forethought end there; for he avoided speaking a word in private to Lady Spencer until after his guests had departed on the following morning; so that she took leave of them with undiminished good will, whispering to Norma, "You must come and see me *very* soon, my dear!"

The latter felt that she had indeed been mercifully dealt with and was full of

gratitude to her father, who, while they were driving to the station, only remarked with a sigh, "Loddondale spoke to me last night. I confess I had hoped that he would have better news to give me."

"I couldn't help it, papa," said Norma, taking his hand, which was cold, notwithstanding the heat of the summer sun.

"Oh no; you couldn't help it. You were bound to tell him the truth, since he insisted upon hearing it; though surely he might have known—but it doesn't signify. I suppose he thinks I was so eager to be the father-in-law of a marquis that your happiness was quite a secondary consideration with me."

"I am sure he doesn't think that," Norma declared.

"It doesn't matter what he thinks," returned Mr. Shafto wearily.

And in that apathetic humour, which was altogether foreign to his nature, he remained for some time after their return to London. He was in no way unkind to

his daughter; he neither reproached her nor was impatient with her, as he had been when he had tried in vain to get her to marry Lord Walter; but he did not seem to care about having her with him and would glance wistfully towards the door if she looked for a few minutes into the study where he sat all day long, with piles of documents before him which he was not perusing. She was almost sorry that he had ceased to make those daily expeditions into the City which had formerly kept him so busy, though she could not but hope that this meant an abandonment of speculation on his part.

What it really did mean was that he was afraid to venture so far from home. Once in the street he was seized with a sudden giddiness, and would have fallen if a passer-by had not caught him as he stumbled and helped him into a chemist's shop. The attack passed off in a few minutes; but on the following day he had a similar one, and after that he made up

his mind that it would not do for him to overtire himself. Besides, to tell the truth, there was no longer anything to take him to the City; for he had at present no available sum large enough to be worth speculating with. So he sat indoors from morning to night and was thoroughly miserable and depressed, never having been accustomed to a sedentary life.

Norma was growing more and more uneasy about him, perceiving plainly that he was uneasy about himself, when she received a note from Madge Shearman, reminding her of her promise to pay a visit to Brampton. "We have no inducements to hold out," Madge wrote; "it is duller than ditch-water here just now. But Christopher thinks that you may be disposed to take pity upon us in our solitude."

Norma did not think it very likely that her father would care to take advantage of this invitation; but she mentioned it to him, and, rather to her surprise, he jumped

at it eagerly. "By all means let us go! I should like to see how things are looking down at the old place, and a little country air will do us both good. Write a line and tell them we'll come as soon as they can have us, Norma."

From that moment there was a decided improvement both in his spirits and his health; so that a few days later, while they were travelling down to Stourshire, he even began to talk about riding and wondered whether Shearman had a quiet cob in his stable, "suitable for an elderly and infirm gentleman."

Sir Christopher had horses of all shapes and sizes in his stable; but Mr. Shafto did not ask for the loan of any of them. He was curiously languid and averse to exertion of any kind; but he enjoyed the change and the quiet of the country.

"Don't you bother yourself about me," he said to his host on the morning after his arrival; "I can make myself quite happy pottering about the garden and the conser-

vatories. Dear me! what improvements you have made, to be sure!"

He took great interest in these improvements, which some dispossessed owners might have found it a little painful to contemplate. Doubtless one of the reasons why Mr. Shafto was so popular was that he never grudged any man prosperity. Sir Christopher, who had always liked him, was touched by the cheerful, matter-of-course way in which he accepted his altered circumstances.

"The poor old fellow is breaking up fast," he told his wife; "I shall be very much surprised if he is alive this time next year. And from what I heard in London, I'm afraid he won't leave a large fortune behind him. Well, I'm very glad we had them down here. We must get them to stay a few weeks with us, if they will."

Madge assented, but without much cordiality. It had been at her husband's suggestion that she had invited the Shaftos to Brampton, and their presence was a

burden to her, easy though they were to entertain. While in London, she had made such inquiries as she had ventured to make, and she was now pretty sure that Lord Walter had proposed at Venice and had been rejected. Also she knew, as almost everybody did, that his brother had become his rival, and that Mr. Shafto had had losses, and that Norma was in danger of being forced into a marriage which it was impossible to suppose that she would have contracted by her own free will. In short, Lady Shearman's reading of the situation was not very far removed from being the true one; and it made her feel guilty and uncomfortable. Moreover, she was horribly afraid lest Norma, who had been welcomed with enthusiasm by every cottager in the vicinity, should take it into her head to cross-question Mr. Green, and should thus find out more than it was desirable for her to know. As some slight safeguard against this danger, she took her friend out in the carriage every day to call

upon the neighbours; and on these occasions the conversation was apt to languish. Norma was evidently in low spirits, and there were so many topics which could not be prudently introduced.

One afternoon Norma begged to be excused, alleging that she was tired and that she had letters to write. So Madge drove away without her; and she ensconced herself in a corner of the drawing-room which had once been hers, and neglected her correspondence, and, at variance with all the habits and principles of her life, gave way to an overwhelming sense of dejection and self-pity. She had never told herself plainly that her father would not be with her much longer; but she knew it; and she knew, too, that by refusing Lord Loddondale's offer she had added greatly to the cares that oppressed him. She did not exactly blame herself for that, because there are moral as well as physical impossibilities; but she felt that her life had been a failure, that she had done no particular

good to those whom she cared for and that her own chance of happiness had, somehow or other, slipped from her grasp. What had that chance of happiness been? Well, she could lay her finger upon it, now that it was only a memory. There had been a certain evening—it was now just about a year ago—when Walter Sinclair had come to dinner, and there had been an afternoon when she had visited his studio and had criticized his statue of Saint Elizabeth. She had seen—how could she help seeing it?—that he was attracted by her; and if he had really felt then as he afterwards averred that he had from the first, she might have loved him. But Madge had come between them—Madge, who had never cared for him, and for whom, as it now appeared, he had not greatly cared—and she had at once effaced herself. Perhaps she had acted neither well nor wisely in effacing herself. But then she remembered the story about Bessie Green, the incredible story which she believed, not-

withstanding its incredibility, and she determined to think no more about what might have been.

She seated herself at the writing-table and began a letter to Lady Adelaide Tomkinson, who had written querulously to ask how things could be kept going when one's fellow-workers rushed out of town in the month of June. But before she had reached the end of the first sentence she was interrupted by the opening of the door behind her and the butler's solemn voice announcing "Mr. Morley."

The critic, philosopher and poet entered the room with slow steps, as his habit was. He had a smile upon his lips and a little volume bound in white vellum under his arm. He said, "I am indeed fortunate! I hoped that I might see you this afternoon, Miss Shafto; but I scarcely ventured to hope that I should find you alone."

"You are more flattering to me than to Lady Shearman," remarked Norma, as she shook hands with him.

Mr. Morley lowered himself into an armchair and sighed comfortably. "I admit it," he replied. "Lady Shearman is in many ways a delightful and interesting study; but she is so unlike you as to be almost your opposite, and opposites cannot be made to blend."

"Can't they?" said Norma absently.

He shook his head. "Quite impossible! Therefore opposites should not be placed in juxtaposition, except with a view to contrast. Now in conversation one doesn't want contrast; one wants harmony."

Norma thought that, if that were the case, one wasn't particularly likely to get it just then; but she did her best to gratify the fastidious Basil by listening patiently to his sententious talk. She was always sorry for him, knowing how few people could endure his company for five minutes without becoming exasperated to the extent of quite forgetting their manners; besides which, she was at that moment willing to listen to any one who was at all likely to make her laugh.

It was with no such intention that Mr. Morley proceeded to enlarge upon the salient features of Lady Shearman's character. He had studied her closely, he said, and for a time with real curiosity; but he was bound to admit that, since her return from abroad, he had been disappointed in her. She seemed, if he might so express himself, to be becoming domesticated, to be losing originality and initiative, to be sinking into acquiescence in what ought by rights to be an intolerable fate for her. "If she had a baby, or babies, I should despair of her. She would never do anything startling then."

"What startling things do you expect her to do in the absence of babies?" Norma inquired.

"Ah, there it is! One doesn't know—one can't tell. What limits can one put to the possible vagaries of a wayward, wilful woman who has a jealous tyrant for her husband?"

"I don't think you ought to speak like

that about people who are your friends as well as mine," said Norma.

"But, dear Miss Shafto, you know that I do not exaggerate. As for their being my friends, I may perhaps flatter myself that I possess Lady Shearman's friendship; but Sir Christopher does not love me. Latterly he has been so good as to tolerate my presence; but during the winter I used really to be afraid sometimes that he would assault me. A jealous fancy, for which, as I need scarcely tell you, there never was the slightest ground."

Norma could not help saying that it was quite unnecessary to assure her of that; whereupon he hoisted himself up in his chair and bowed, as if she had paid him a well-merited compliment. Presently, he held out the vellum-bound volume, which he had been fondling all this time.

"At last," said he, "I have the satisfaction of placing my poor collection of sonnets in your hands. I have been longer than I intended to be in delivering them

over to the printers; but I have a horror of haste, and perhaps the delay is not to be regretted, since it has enabled me to recast my design and to give it a more definite character. Contrasts, as I was saying just now, are to be deprecated in conversation; but in literature they are effective. The essence of this little work is contrast—contrast between two types of womanhood. Every line in it has been inspired by one or other of the ladies whom I have attempted to depict, and I have therefore dedicated the whole to them. The fly-leaf, you see, bears the inscription, 'To N. and M.'"

"Does that mean nobody in particular, according to the precedent of the Church Catechism?" inquired Norma.

"How can you ask such a question?" exclaimed the poet reproachfully. "I do not care to admit the world at large into my secrets; but surely to you the initials must speak for themselves. If you will read the third sonnet, you will see yourself reflected as in a mirror. Your modesty

might possibly prevent you from recognizing the portrait; but I really do not think that you could fail to recognize Lady Shearman in—for example—the seventh, ninth, and tenth."

Norma glanced at the pages referred to, and gathered that she was "a star, unconscious of its radiance pure;" also that Mr. Morley's "storm-vext soul" was accustomed, when whelmed in surging waves of "doubt and dark despair," to steer by her light towards some destination which was not specified. After that, it was not surprising to find that Madge was a Will-o'-the-wisp, luring the way-worn wanderer with "flickering flames that faint and fail." In addition to this undesirable characteristic, it appeared that she possessed that of "the tiny stone that starts the avalanche," as well as that of "the child who, half in malice, half in ignorance," places a log across the track of the approaching express and subsequently "o'er the wreck and carnage lightly laughs."

Norma thought it highly improbable that any child, however malicious or ignorant, would act in the manner described; but she confined her criticisms to the remark that neither N. nor M. seemed to be treated by their delineator as responsible beings.

"I think," replied Mr. Morley, with an indulgent smile, "that you will require to read the sonnets a little more carefully before you can quite enter into their meaning. I have endeavoured to be lucid; but there are thoughts which no language can render absolutely obvious, and a poet should not only express his thoughts, but make his readers think. In prose I always adopt a more superficial style. By the way, did you read my contribution to the *Omniscient Review?*"

"Yes," answered Norma, "I did; and there were some thoughts—or rather statements—in it which were not quite so lucid as I should have liked them to be. I have always meant to ask you about them."

"We need not, I presume, put the dots upon the i's," said Mr. Morley. "No doubt you allude to one statement in particular, and I dare say I shall not be very far wrong if I assume that your attention was drawn to it in consequence of something that you may have heard from Lady Shearman?"

Norma, after a momentary hesitation, signified assent.

"I quite calculated upon that. I will confess that I sent the article to you because it contained the statement in question. Nay, more; I will confess that I wrote the article chiefly in order to make that statement; and from what I have since heard, I rejoice to think that I attained my object in so doing. My object," he explained, with a sweet smile, "was to preserve a star from falling."

"But one is not justified in telling a falsehood to preserve the entire firmament from falling," returned Norma, losing

patience. "Was the statement true? That is what I wanted to ask you."

Now, Mr. Morley could not, of course, know it to be a fact that Lord Walter had married Bessie Green; but he really believed it to be a fact; so he shook his head and said, "I am afraid there can be no doubt about it."

"But can you prove it?" persisted Norma. "It is nothing to me; only I don't think any one has a right to make insinuations, unless he is able, if called upon, to 'put the dots on the i's,' as you say."

This was a little uncomfortable for Mr. Morley, who however was willing to tell all that he knew. But he had not advanced beyond preliminaries when Madge came in from her drive, thus probably saving him from a severe rebuke.

CHAPTER XI.

THE POET SPEAKS.

Many of Basil Morley's (unpublished) erotic ballads were sufficiently impassioned in sentiment and diction to satisfy the most ardent souls; but their author was not himself a man whose passions or emotions were very strong. His was the calm of a refined stoic; he recognized in his own character—and it was no fault of his if less clear-sighted people failed to do so—divers personal traits which are associated with the names of Marcus Aurelius, Dante and Petrarch. Also he thought it not unlikely that Plato might, as regarded certain matters, have felt very much as he did. He shrank from the petty cares and ties which belong to matrimony; and

although, for purposes of inspiration, a Beatrice or a Laura might be serviceable to him, he would have preferred worshipping her from afar to living under the same roof with her. However, it had been his good or ill fortune to be born in the nineteenth century, and one must belong to one's period. That indeed was one of his maxims, and in pursuance of it he had resolved to honour Miss Shafto by asking her to share his lot. He had fully intended to make his wishes known in the course of the interview recorded in the last chapter; but it always took him a long time to come to his point, and on this occasion he had been interrupted, as has been mentioned, by the entrance of Lady Shearman before he had so much as approached it. Thus he was compelled to postpone to some future opportunity the avowal which he hoped that she would receive with pleased surprise.

As it chanced, he was not kept waiting many days. The cottage inhabited by

Mrs. Morley and her son stood almost within a stone's throw of the high-road; and one afternoon, the poet, who was wandering aimlessly about his restricted domain, saw the well-known Shearman barouche pass rapidly between the hedge-rows. Having satisfied himself that it had only one occupant, and that that occupant wore a bonnet which he had previously admired upon Lady Shearman's head, he resolved to take advantage of the occasion and at once set out to walk across the fields to Brampton. He had just as much of doubt as to his success as was needed to give him an agreeable sensation of excitement. That Norma appreciated him he was sure. She was, in fact, the only person in the neighbourhood who did—probably the only one who was capable of so doing. As for her loving him, well, he was greatly mistaken in her if love with her would not mean something quite different from what it would mean with Madge Shearman, for instance.

Esteem and admiration must necessarily

in Norma's case be the basis of any such sentiment. He would not have been at all surprised at her having loved Lord Walter Sinclair; because Lord Walter, by reason of his artistic achievements, was entitled to admiration. To Miss Shafto's esteem he was not entitled, and it had been necessary to tell her so. That, no doubt, had disposed of any chance that the young sculptor might ever have had. Norma would not be Norma if she could love a man so calculating and cynical. Basil, on the other hand, had led a blameless life—or, at least, if he had been guilty of some trifling lapses from the path of an austere morality and philosophy, these had not been such as she was likely ever to hear about. Therefore he swung his stick jauntily as he stepped through the hayfields and composed an anticipatory poem, descriptive of the stooping of his star through the storm and stress of something or other, and the consequent happy and elevating results as regarded the poet's mind.

But the poet's mind was terribly vexed when, on striking across the lawn towards the front door at Brampton, he saw a certain high dog-cart, which he knew only too well, drawing near from the opposite direction. Few people, according to Basil's philosophy, were worth hating, just as few were worth loving; but he really did rather hate Miss Travers, who, it must be confessed, had lost no opportunity of making herself hateful to him, and that he should encounter her at this juncture was especially unfortunate.

But apparently that was not the light in which Miss Travers regarded their meeting. The moment that she espied Mr. Morley she began shouting at him and waving her whip. Then she quickened her pace, dashed up the drive, and checked her huge grey horse so abruptly that she almost threw him upon his haunches.

"Well, this is luck!" she exclaimed. "I've sent my groom down to the village to do a commission, and I was wondering

who I could get to hold my horse for me while I ran in and saw Norma. You'll do capitally. Have you rung the bell yet?"

"No doubt there are plenty of grooms in the stable-yard——" began Basil.

"Oh, bother! the stables are a quarter of a mile away, and I'm in a hurry."

"Then I dare say one of the footmen——"

"Bless the man! you don't suppose I would trust a flunkey to hold a three hundred guinea horse, do you? Besides, he would be in far too great a funk to attempt it. Not that there's anything to be frightened about; for the grey is as quiet as a sheep so long as he isn't startled or fidgeted. All you've got to do is to stand at his head. I won't keep you more than ten minutes."

Meanwhile, the door had been opened, and Miss Travers, having ascertained that Norma was at home, ran nimbly up the steps, leaving the reluctant Basil in charge of an animal whose looks he did not half

like. "Mind he don't strike out at you with his fore-legs," she called back over her shoulder; "he sometimes does."

"How the deuce am I to prevent him?" returned poor Basil, whose stoicism was apt to fail him in moments of personal peril. But to this very natural question he received no reply, while he was disagreeably conscious of the supercilious amusement of the menials in the doorway.

Miss Travers entered the drawing-room chuckling. "Norma, my dear," said she, "you may thank me, if you like, for doing you a good turn. I found Morley-porley in the act of ringing the bell, and with the greatest presence of mind, I asked him to hold my horse for me. I know exactly what he will do; he will try to propitiate the grey by stroking his nose—and then he'll have some healthy exercise."

"What a shame!" exclaimed Norma. "If you had no pity for him, you might have thought of your own property. The chances are that when you go out, you will

be punished by finding your horse staked and your dog-cart broken to pieces. I will ring and send somebody to relieve poor Mr. Morley."

"For Heaven's sake, don't! No injury will be done to anybody or anything, except the gravel, which may be a little cut up; Morley-porley will be dragged about and agitated, and will get so hot that he will have to run home to his mother and change his clothes, and you will be spared a visit from him, that's all. Now, Norma, I haven't much time to lose; so you must excuse my proceeding straight to business. I want to know what's wrong between you and Walter Sinclair."

"Nothing at all," answered Norma.

"Oh yes, there is; I know a good deal, if I don't know everything. I know you have refused him, and I know you have refused his brother too. Of course you couldn't marry Loddondale—I never supposed you would, and it was like his impudence to ask you—but why you should

have turned Walter away, I can't understand."

"For the simplest of all reasons," Norma replied.

"So he says; but then I don't happen to believe it. You know, Norma, you are not a very good hand at keeping a secret. You are too honest to be able to disguise your feelings, and anybody who knows you and cares for you as I do can read you like a book. The other day, when I spoke to you about Walter at the bazaar, it was as plain as plain could be that you were displeased with him about something, and he himself hasn't the slightest idea what it is; so——"

"Has he sent you to ask me?" interrupted Norma, with a heightened colour.

"Not he! He has a poor opinion of my skill, and a pretty high one of his own. For all that, I am right; and I'm determined to get to the bottom of this misunderstanding; for a misunderstanding it certainly is. Come! who has been traducing him to you?

I would lay a trifle of odds that it is Madge Shearman."

This inquisition threatened to become embarrassing. "One can't help feeling a little provoked with a person whose friends are so officious," said Norma, laughing. "Surely, when one has received an offer of marriage and has declined it, with a due sense of the compliment, the matter might be allowed to drop. If you offered me a cup of tea and I said 'No, thank you,' you wouldn't keep on pestering me to give reasons for not drinking what I didn't want."

"That is all very fine," returned Miss Travers; "but you won't put me off with false analogies, my dear. You have got some mistaken idea about Walter Sinclair into your head, and the sooner you get rid of it the better. It is for your own sake that I say so," she added significantly. "As for Walter, he is a very good fellow, but he is a man; and men always console themselves sooner or later."

It is by no means improbable that Miss Travers would have succeeded in breaking down Norma's reticence, had she been suffered to continued the attack: but now there arose from outside the house a hubbub which suddenly diverted her thoughts into another channel.

"Come and look at him!—come and look at him!" she exclaimed gleefully; "he is having a rare time of it now, I know!"

Norma followed her into the hall, where the butler and two footmen were discovered leaning out of the window in full enjoyment of a struggle which they did not feel it to be any business of theirs to share. Outside, Mr. Morley could be discerned, plunging wildly in unison with the plunges of the grey horse, who was backing away from him, and whom he was addressing in alternate terms of endearment and abuse. "Woa then!—Stand still, can't you!—Poor fellow!—Confound you, you ugly brute!"—together with apostrophes of a more emphatic and profane character.

Miss Travers laughed delightedly. "Did you ever see such a duffer in all your born days?" she ejaculated. Then she threw open the door and emerged upon the steps. "Stick to him!" she shouted. "Mind what you're about!—don't let him back on to the flower-beds. Man alive! can't you stand at a horse's head without fretting him into a fever?"

If the horse was in a fever, so was the poet. His hat had fallen off, the perspiration was running down his cheeks, he was gasping for breath, and would doubtless have cast the recalcitrant grey loose long ere this, had he not been painfully aware of the butler and the footmen. To these spectators had now been added Miss Travers and the lady of his heart: obviously therefore it behoved him to continue the fight while he had a leg to stand upon. The unfortunate part of it was that he didn't in the least know what he ought to do, and that the horse was perfectly aware of his incapacity. Also

he was in mortal terror lest that evil brute should (in accordance with Miss Travers's prediction) strike out with his fore-leg and kick him in the stomach.

Norma, whose nature had in it no trace of that element of cruelty which is common to the great mass of men and women, was not much diverted by a spectacle which made Miss Travers laugh till the tears ran down her cheeks. "Go and help him, Nell," she pleaded. "He is doing his best; and it isn't fair to make him so ridiculous."

"*I'm* not making him ridiculous," Miss Travers declared; "goodness knows he can do that for himself, without anybody's assistance!"

However, as she was always ready to do anything in reason to oblige Norma, she descended the steps and made for the scene of action, where indeed her presence was required. For the grey, who had probably begun his antics merely with a view to a little amusement, had now become frightened or irritated, and just as his mistress ap-

proached he suddenly reared. The luckless Basil was dragged off his legs, and, losing his balance, fell flat upon his back, uttering a screech of alarm. When he arose, the grey, though snorting and quivering, had ceased to jump about, while Miss Travers had already scrambled into her dog-cart and had taken the reins.

"Now let this be a lesson to you," said she, shaking her finger solemnly at him from the driving-seat. "If you hadn't played the fool you wouldn't have been rolled over in the dust. You're always trying to be clever; and see what comes of it! Be advised by me, Mr. Morley, and don't you try to be clever any more. Good-bye, Norma; come and see me some day when you can come alone."

So away she went, and the butler gravely handed Mr. Morley his hat, while one of the footmen brushed him down. It had been a disconcerting episode and one which would have diverted ninety-nine men out of a hundred from their purpose; but

Basil, perhaps, represented the exception which proves the rule. After he had been taken into the drawing-room by Norma and had had some tea, and had said a few of the bitterest things that he could think of about Nell Travers, he began to feel himself again, insomuch that he recalled to memory certain flowery speeches which he had rehearsed during his walk. These he now deliberately enunciated, much to the surprise of Norma, who at first did not in the least understand what he was driving at. But by degrees he condescended to make himself more intelligible; so that at length she had to inform him, as gently and considerately as she could, that he must think no more of an alliance which was altogether out of the question.

And now it was Mr. Morley's turn to be dull of comprehension. "I have startled you," said he, with a sweet, sad smile. "You were unprepared for this; you have regarded me—and indeed that is very natural—as a lonely man and one unfitted

for domesticity. But when you have thought the matter over quietly your fears, I trust, will vanish. You will realize that I have not acted hastily—I never act hastily—that I should not have taken this step had I not been convinced that in doing so I am consulting your happiness as well as my own, and that, although to the outer world I may appear to be a cynic, yet——"

"I assure you," interrupted Norma, "that I have not, and never could have had, any such thoughts. I am very sorry that you should have made this—this extraordinary mistake, and I don't wish to seem unkind; but I really can't let you imagine that there is the remotest possibility of my ever marrying you."

Mr. Morley's countenance grew dark. "It seems, then," said he, "that my warnings have been in vain. Your heart has been stolen from me by the man who less than a year ago was ready to throw himself at the feet of a woman immeasurably your

inferior! I do not blame him for that—few of us can dominate our passions, or say why we love, or cease to love—I do not blame him for that, although I think it shows his inability to appreciate you; but I do say that a man who tried to win your love while his own deserted wife was still alive is unworthy to possess it."

"You are assuming what you have no right to assume, Mr. Morley, and I shall not take the trouble to contradict you," answered Norma coldly; "but please leave other people's characters alone. That story is probably quite untrue, and whether it is true or false, I don't wish to hear any more about it."

"Yet you questioned me about it the last time that I was here, and questioned me very eagerly too," observed Mr. Morley.

"I asked you whether you could prove that what you had stated was a fact—and it appeared that you couldn't."

Mr. Morley rose and drew himself up to his full height. "If proofs are what you

require," said he, "you shall have them; I will make it my business to obtain them. Of my own hopes I will for the present say no more. I can bear to lose you, if so it must be; but what I cannot and will not bear is to surrender you to one who deserves, not your love, but your contempt."

"You purposely misunderstand me!" exclaimed Norma. "I want no proofs; I am not concerned in the matter. I merely wished to point out to you that you had no business to state as a fact what you didn't know to be a fact."

But the haughty Basil took no notice of her disclaimer. "Farewell, Miss Shafto," said he; "I will not see you again until I can tell you that I have accomplished my quest."

With that he strode out of the room, leaving Norma to repent of her error in judgment. This idiot would doubtless stir up all the details of a scandal which might very well have been left alone; he would

cause infinite annoyance to people with whom she had no quarrel; and, worst of all, he would be pretty sure to let everybody know that his exertions were undertaken on her account and for her sake. She could only trust that his natural stupidity would render those exertions abortive.

CHAPTER XII.

REBUS IN ARDUIS.

To obtain proof positive of a genuine marriage is not always the easy matter that it ought to be, while the futility of seeking for evidence of an imaginary one is generally slow to dawn upon the anxious inquirer. Mr. Morley, therefore, had undertaken a task which was sure to keep him busy for a considerable length of time, and, while he was engaged upon it, Norma reaped the benefit of the sentence of banishment from her presence which he had chosen to pass upon himself. For a day or two she was uneasy, expecting always to see him appear in triumph, with a copy of a marriage certificate in his hands; but one nail drives out another

and she had at this time many subjects for troubled thought besides that of Basil Morley and his possible vagaries. Her father's health and spirits had improved a little, but only a little. He had become very quiet and silent and did not seem to care much about seeing his old friends, nor indeed about doing anything, except sitting in the sun with a newspaper upon his knees which he did not read. At the same time, he was very anxious to remain where he was. He grew cross and agitated when Norma suggested to him that their visit had lasted long enough and that they ought to be thinking about returning home.

"What's your hurry?" he asked. "There's nothing to be done at home when we get there, and our friends here don't want to be rid of us yet, I believe. I thought you would enjoy having a quiet time at Brampton."

Norma enjoyed it just about as much as one enjoys the loan of a horse which has

once been one's own property. However, she was glad to do anything that would please him, and the hospitality of the Shearmans seemed to be proffered in all sincerity. Madge was reassured by the departure from the Shafto Arms of Mr. Green, who, being now in independent circumstances, had removed himself and his belongings to a villa on the outskirts of the assize town, which was situated on the other side of the county. Neither she nor Norma ever mentioned Lord Walter Sinclair's name; and it was in vain that Nell Travers sought an opportunity of renewing the cross-examination in which she had been interrupted.

So the days passed on, without any special incident to mark them, until the middle of July, when Mr. Shafto received a letter which startled him out of the state of lethargy into which he had lately fallen. This communication was from a City magnate with whom he was acquainted, and who, in view of certain confidential

inquiries made of him by Mr. Shafto a few weeks previously, "thought it only right" to mention rumours which were in circulation, and which, he feared, were only too well founded. Mr. Shafto said nothing to Norma about these rumours, but he told her that he had business matters to attend to and that they must go home immediately.

Accordingly they left for London the same afternoon, and, late as it was when they arrived, Mr. Shafto drove straight from the station into the City, where, as might have been anticipated, he saw nobody and heard nothing. He came back to dinner very tired, but less dejected than Norma had expected him to be.

"There has been a crisis in financial circles," he vouchsafed to inform her; "but the evening papers speak hopefully about it. I shall see Lämmergeier to-morrow and hear what he has to say. Lämmergeier has plenty of enemies who would be only too glad to think that he was hard hit;

but we may take their assertions for what they are worth. It would require something more than a temporary crisis to bring Lämmergeier to serious grief, I imagine."

"But if he did come to grief?" suggested Norma.

"If he did—well, even if he did—but there's no need to anticipate anything so improbable. I have been out of sorts lately, and that has made me nervous, fancying all kinds of absurd things. The fact is that during the winter I wasn't quite as prudent as I ought to have been, and perhaps I shouldn't have allowed the management of my affairs to pass out of my own hands as I did. But I'll put all that straight now; I won't delay about it any longer; and if Lämmergeier is affronted, I can't help it. But I don't think he will have any right to be affronted. I shall tell him that I'm getting to be an old man, and that I naturally want to know how I stand, and so forth. I suppose he'll see the reasonableness of that, eh?"

"Will it signify very much if he doesn't?" asked Norma. "If you have trusted him with money that belongs to you, you can claim it when you please without giving him any cause for complaint."

"That's as may be. I am under great obligations to Lämmergeier, and at a time like this I shouldn't wish him to think that I had lost confidence in him. I would rather submit to a little further anxiety than seem to bolt like a rat from a sinking ship."

But on the ensuing morning Mr. Shafto did not feel well enough to go into the City, as he had intended doing. He woke with a headache, and, after perusing the money article in the *Times*, which, though somewhat alarmist in tone, and recording a heavy fall in almost all securities, contained no such allusions as he had secretly feared that he might see there, he decided that he would remain at home. "After all, twenty-four hours can't make much

difference, one way or the other," he said half apologetically to Norma, who guessed that he shrank from making demands upon the man whom, as he had once confessed, he had trusted too much.

It was as well that he did remain at home, for he would have gained nothing by an expedition eastwards. Soon after luncheon the first edition of the evening paper was brought to him, and the moment that he opened it his eyes fell upon a paragraph headed, "FAILURE OF BARON LÄMMERGEIER, M.P."

According to the newspaper, this intelligence would not come as a surprise to the initiated, and, truth to tell, it scarcely came as a surprise to Mr. Shafto, who nevertheless was within an ace of fainting away when confronted with it. Norma, who was with him at the time, made him lie down, and brought him a glass of wine, which presently revived him. She wanted to send for the doctor, but that he would not hear of.

"I was startled for the moment—anybody would have been startled," said he, sitting up; "but I'm all right again now. We must keep our wits about us and not take fright at shadows. Poor Lämmergeier's failure is a blow to me of course, only, as I was telling you yesterday, it doesn't imply—it doesn't imply—why should it, you know? I never had any share in his business. I couldn't even tell you exactly what his business was."

He rambled on in this way for a minute or two. Norma did not very well understand what he was talking about, but she tried to dissuade him from hurrying off to Grosvenor Place, as he declared that he would do. The utmost that she could accomplish, however—and that was not easy—was to induce him to wait until the carriage could be ready to take him. During the interval he paced impatiently up and down the room, no longer concealing his agitation, though he kept on repeating that there was no cause for

alarm, that his affairs were quite distinct from Lämmergeier's affairs, and a good deal more to the like effect.

He was absent for rather more than an hour, and when he returned his face told its own tale—a tale for which Norma was quite prepared. He did not say much, he seemed to be stupefied, but when she asked him whether they were ruined he made a sign of assent. After a time he explained more fully what had occurred. He had intrusted his entire fortune to Baron Lämmergeier, and not a penny of it was now forthcoming. "Lämmergeier made some investments for me which appeared to be safe. I certainly understood that they were safe—but it has turned out that they were not. And he says I gave him *carte blanche.* Very likely I did—I can't remember. My memory is completely gone."

He drew a memorandum-book from his pocket and tried to enter into particulars, but these were utterly unintelligible to his hearer, who begged him not to worry

himself with them. Of what value indeed were particulars? The evident fact was that Baron Lämmergeier had possessed himself of Mr. Shafto's property and had lost that drop in the ocean of his own losses. She had foreseen this catastrophe, and was amazed at the comparative calmness with which her father submitted to it, not knowing that it had also been foreseen by him.

"Have we absolutely nothing left, papa?" she asked at length.

"Absolutely nothing?" he repeated vaguely. "Well, I think there's a trifle left, but I can't be sure. Whatever it may be, it isn't enough for us to live upon."

Then, all of a sudden, he broke out into bitter lamentations and self-reproaches. He had been warned again and again, it seemed, but he had refused to listen. He had not believed that Lämmergeier was a dishonest man—scarcely believed it even now. Perhaps, after all, Lämmergeier had not been to blame. "At any rate he declares

that he wasn't. He was very busy and could only see me for a few minuites, though I had a long talk with his wife. He says I ought to put a brave face upon misfortune, as he does. A brave face, that's easily said! He has years of life before him, and with his talents and opportunities he may make another fortune; but I'm only a useless old man, with one foot in the grave. It isn't for myself that I care; I'm ready to go into the workhouse to-morrow. But what is to become of you, Norma?—ah, my poor child, what is to become of you?"

He held out his trembling hands to her, and the tears which had gathered in his faded eyes brimmed over and ran down his cheeks.

Well, it was no very difficult matter to console and comfort him. He was so broken down, and his brain was so confused that he could not think of more than one thing at a time, and when he found that Norma was neither angry nor horrorstruck,

he grew almost cheerful again. Possibly, too, it was something of a relief to him to know that the worst that could happen had happened and was over. He had no plans for the future, nor any ideas that Norma could gather. From that moment he surrendered himself into her hands and agreed passively to everything that she suggested. They could dispose of the house, oh yes; that would bring in something, no doubt—and the furniture, and the carriage and horses. She didn't think that they would starve then? Was there any money in the bank? Yes; he supposed so. But perhaps the best way would be for her to look through his papers. He would give her his keys after dinner. He thought he would go and lie down until dinner-time, if she didn't mind.

He disposed of his dinner with a very fair appetite, and for the benefit of the servants talked about commonplaces much as usual. When his daughter and he were left alone, he took her into his study

and made her sit down at the writing-table.

"Now, my dear," said he, "you had better look into things for yourself. You will find all you want in the top drawer—my pass-book and my cheque-book and a few memoranda; I have no head left for figures."

So saying, he sank down into an arm-chair, and in a very few minutes was fast asleep.

With the materials at her disposal, Norma was not able to arrive at any clear comprehension of her father's financial position that night, though she worked hard until long after he had gone to bed. But she wrote to his bankers, and in the course of a few days she made out that they would henceforth have an income of something under four hundred pounds a year, which amount would of course be considerably added to if they were able to let the house in Upper Belgrave Street. That was not absolute ruin; but to people

of their tastes and habits it was so very like it, that Norma's heart sank at the thought of what lay before them.

To her father however she spoke of the future with cheerfulness and confidence. For the next few months they would have to be very careful and economical, but there was a good chance of their letting the house in the autumn, and they might count with certainty upon doing so for the ensuing season. Meanwhile, the first thing to be done was to get rid of the servants and the carriage and settle themselves down somewhere in quiet lodgings. And one morning she announced to him that these quiet lodgings had been discovered. She had made an expedition down Chelsea way and had been lucky enough to hit upon a set of rooms near Cheyne Walk which were cheap and clean, and were kept by a respectable old woman who stated that she knew how to cook. "And if she doesn't, I can give her some hints," Norma observed. To all this Mr.

Shafto listened placidly, nodding assent and seeming to regard the whole situation from a detached point of view, as though it did not specially concern him. "What a head you have, Norma!" he would exclaim admiringly from time to time, but this was almost the only comment that he made upon her proceedings. As if to emphasize the completeness of his abdication, he took to spending the greater part of the day in the drawing-room, where he dozed over the newspapers while she wrote the letters which had to be written and transacted the business which had to be transacted in the study, which he no longer cared to enter. She was thus engaged one afternoon, when she was somewhat abruptly intruded upon by a lady who had declined to accept the words "not at home" in their conventional sense.

Mrs. Lämmergeier looked pale and sad. She did not take the hand which Norma extended to her, but said, without any preface, "You understand now why I

didn't come to see you before. I was ashamed; I knew it was too late to save you, and it would have been too disgraceful to go on pretending to be your friend. Yet I was your friend, as far as I could be; I warned you—more than that I couldn't do. But the fact remains that your father has been robbed, and that my husband is the thief."

Norma certainly believed that such was the fact; still her heart bled for poor Mrs. Lämmergeier, whose humiliation she understood, and who at least had had no hand in the robbery. "That is saying a great deal too much," she answered. "I know very little about papa's speculations, but I suppose that if Baron Lämmergeier had been successful, he would have been successful too. After all, Baron Lämmergeier is just as much ruined as we are."

But Mrs. Lämmergeier shook her head. "Oh no, he is not ruined; he is only bankrupt. He can live very comfortably upon my fortune, and I dare say it won't

be long before he makes another for himself. I can't explain the morality of men like Hermann. He is just as much a thief as if he had picked your father's pocket—and there are others besides your father. But none of them, I believe, have a legal claim against him, and he doesn't blame himself. If it were worth while, I could perhaps convince you that he is in some queer sort of way conscientious. But I didn't come here to make excuses for him."

She did not at once state why she had come. She consented to sit down, after she had been repeatedly begged to do so, and then asked a few questions in a timid, hesitating way. Apparently she was aware that Mr. Shafto was in a precarious state of health, and she shuddered when she heard that it was proposed to remove him shortly to lodgings in Chelsea.

"But it will kill him!" she exclaimed; "he will never be able to get on without servants to wait upon him, or any of the

little luxuries to which he has been accustomed all his life."

"We have no choice," observed Norma rather coldly; after which there was a long period of silence.

It was broken by Mrs. Lämmergeier, who said, "Miss Shafto, you are always kind. You were very kind to me last year, when I didn't need kindness nearly as much as I do now. Will you do one more small thing for me?—if it is only to show that you forgive me for being the wife of the man who has brought all this misery upon you."

"I will, if I can," answered Norma.

"You can, if you will. My money is my own and I can spend it as I please. I can't pay the whole, or anything like the whole of my husband's debts, but I can do something. Will you let me pay a little part of what we owe you?"

Norma shook her head. "That is impossible, Mrs. Lämmergeier; I am really grateful to you for making the offer, but it

would be quite out of the question for us to accept it."

"Ah, don't be so hard!" pleaded Mrs. Lämmergeier, with tears in her eyes. "I am not asking you to accept a gift, I am only asking you to take back a part of what is your own. The law would entitle you to demand it, if the law hadn't been formed for the benefit of swindlers. Think of your father; you can't, surely, have the heart to make him suffer for the sins of others."

But Norma held out firmly against these and a great many more entreaties. She tried to word her refusal as considerately as possible, and to explain that her father was not reduced to such extreme straits as to require pecuniary help; but Mrs. Lämmergeier was not to be deceived.

"I understand," said she, with a deep sigh, as she rose. "You would rather starve than take a penny which could be said to belong in any way to Hermann. Perhaps you are right; perhaps if I were

in your place, I should feel as you do. But you make me very miserable. Good-bye, Miss Shafto; will you shake hands with me for the last time?"

Norma put her arms round the unhappy woman's neck and kissed her. "I am not going to say good-bye for the last time," she declared, "because I hope you will come and see me when we are settled in Chelsea."

"No," answered Mrs. Lämmergeier, "I shall never see you again; I couldn't bear it—and I know you cannot wish to see me. If you ever think about me, think about me as one who is more wretched than you are, however wretched you may be."

Norma had to let her go. In truth Mrs. Lämmergeier's trouble did not admit of consolatory suggestions. Possibly she loved her rascally husband; possibly she hated him; either way, her lot was one of the few for which no alleviation can be devised or imagined.

CHAPTER XIII.

BARON LÄMMERGEIER'S GENEROSITY.

THE insolvency of Baron Lämmergeier caused more stir in the social than in the financial world. Certainly it was something of an event in the latter; but it was one which had been anticipated, and it was important rather by reason of its coincidence with the collapse of certain undertakings with which he had been connected than on its own account. It was pretty well known, indeed, that the baron's personal creditors would receive a satisfactory amount in the pound, and the City was disposed to regard him as the victim of circumstances. But among his personal creditors could not be reckoned Mr. Shafto and many others who, like Mr. Shafto, had

trusted to him to make them rich. These persons may have been unreasonable and illogical; they may have had only themselves to thank for their misfortunes, and it may have been perfectly absurd on their part to hold Baron Lämmergeier answerable for moneys speculatively invested in, for example, the Trans-African Railway Company, which was already in liquidation. But some of them raised a prodigious outcry and made free use of such terms as "liar" and "swindler." Thus the baron's reputation sank to a low ebb in the west end of the town, and would doubtless have sunk lower still if the season had not been at an end and everybody going away.

As for Mr. Shafto, he held his peace and remained indoors, which was perhaps the reason why scarcely any of his numerous acquaintances heard of his ruin. Walter Sinclair, who knew something of the relations which had subsisted between Mr. Shafto and the Jewish financier, was an

exception. Immediately after the Ascot week he had received a visit from his brother, who had spoken to him with great candour.

"My goose is cooked," Lord Loddondale had said; "she won't have me at any price. She was half inclined to take me, because her old father, who has been playing ducks and drakes with his money, would give anything to establish her, and she would like to please him if she could; but when it came to swallowing the pill, she found that she couldn't do it. Well, there's an end of that. Now, if you survive me, you'll step into my shoes, and, if you don't, your son will. That makes you about as good a match as I am; and I can't help thinking—why I don't exactly know, but I certainly do think so—that she is fond of you. Go in and win, old man. I'm off to Norway for a month or two; I feel a bit down on my luck, somehow or other, and I want to get out of this."

So Lord Loddondale had left England,

and the mercury of Walter's hopes had begun, not unnaturally, to rise again. Guessing that the news of the Lämmergeier crash would bring Mr. Shafto back to London, he made up his mind after a few days to call in Upper Belgrave Street, where, however, he did not succeed in obtaining admission. Mr. Shafto was not very well and was lying down, the butler said. Miss Shafto was at home, but he believed that she was engaged. Thereupon Walter produced a sovereign.

"I should like to see Miss Shafto for a few minutes," said he. "Will you take my card to her, please?"

But presently the man returned with Miss Shafto's compliments and a request that she might be excused. She was very busy packing, he explained, as the family was leaving immediately. Then, feeling perhaps that he ought to furnish some equivalent for his tip, he gave full particulars of the family misfortunes, and mentioned the address of the rooms in

Chelsea where his master and mistress would thenceforth be domiciled.

Norma was not so busy but that she could have spared time to receive Walter Sinclair; but she shrank from his pity and from his possible offers of assistance. Moreover, her present feeling was that she had done for ever with persons of Lord Walter's social standing. She was about —so she thought—to disappear altogether from the class to which she had hitherto belonged; and when one has to make these plunges, it is best to make them without valedictory words. For the rest, it must be owned that she was suffering a little from that sense of desertion which people who have sunk from affluence to poverty almost invariably experience. The world (which, by the way, is composed of an aggregation of individuals closely resembling ourselves) is popularly supposed to turn its back upon the unfortunate; but perhaps the world is somewhat maligned in this respect. The unfortunate have a way

of dropping out of sight; and how can kindness or civility be shown to those who are not to be found when inquired after? As has been mentioned, the fashionable world was at this time leaving London, and of Norma's more immediate friends it so chanced that the greater part were out of the way of hearing about her. Lord Loddondale was in Norway; Nell Travers had left home on a round of visits; Lady Spencer Sinclair had departed to recruit her system at Homburg. Madge Shearman, however, wrote very sympathetically, begging for information as to her friend's plans, and assuring her that, if she cared to return to Brampton, she would be more than welcome.

Norma of course declined this invitation, which she did not even mention to her father. If there had been nothing else against it, the expense of the journey would have been a sufficient objection; for she was somewhat unnecessarily nervous upon the score of expenditure. There was a

little money in the bank; the sale of the carriage and horses might be expected to produce at least two hundred pounds, and in the autumn some dividends would become payable; so that she had really no reason for immediate anxiety. But Norma, who had hitherto been accustomed to look upon a hundred pounds as a comparatively trifling sum, hardly realized as yet upon how little it is possible to live.

Mr. Shafto could not be persuaded to inspect his new quarters before the time came for him to take up his abode in them. Indeed, he refused to go out of doors at all, fearing lest he should encounter some inquisitive friend. "I can't walk all the way to Chelsea," he declared, "and we mustn't spend half-crowns on cabs. It is sure to be all right; what is good enough for you, my dear, will be good enough for me."

Nor was the effect of the move, which Norma had greatly dreaded on his behalf, at all prejudicial to him. On the contrary, he seemed to breathe more freely when he

was removed from Upper Belgrave Street and from old associations. The rooms, though very small, were clean and decently furnished; a shilling's worth of flowers and a few knicknacks made them look quite habitable; and the old man accommodated himself to his altered circumstances without a murmur—perhaps even without much sense of discomfort. But he spoke so little that it was difficult to guess how he was feeling or what his thoughts were. As a matter of fact, he felt nothing and thought scarcely at all. He had been stunned by his calamity; virtually he had been killed by it; and if he still survived, it was only as a man who has been mortally wounded will stagger on for yards before he falls to rise no more. But his daughter naturally did not imagine the case to be so serious as that. Except that he was incapable of any exertion and slept a great deal, his health seemed to be tolerably good and his tendency to irritability had entirely left him.

And so was initiated a quiet, monotonous kind of life which was not without its enjoyments. Mr. Shafto did nothing quite contentedly. He rose late; he read the newspapers, taking a very long time over it; in the afternoon he would stroll down to the riverside, seat himself upon a bench, and watch the bustle and hurry of that crowded water-highway in a placid, half-somnolent way until it was time to go home to dinner. Norma busied herself with household matters and also found a few sick people to visit. She made friends with her landlady, a fat, good-natured woman, who was able to give her facilities for making herself useful in that direction. Upon the whole, ruin did not seem to be such a very hard thing to bear, after all.

Now it came to pass that, as Norma was hastening homewards one morning after an interview with the butcher, she was aware of a hurrying footstep behind her, and, on turning her head, was accosted by a swarthy little man in a frock-coat, who

took off his hat and said, "I am glad to have overtaken you, Miss Shafto. Can you spare me a minute or two?"

Norma stood still, bowed, and looked politely expectant. She had never liked Baron Lämmergeier; latterly she had become convinced that he was thoroughly dishonest, and she had very little doubt but that he had used her father's fortune for his own purposes. As however she could not prove this, she had no excuse for refusing to listen to anything that he might have to say to her.

What he had to say was that he had heard with the deepest sorrow of Mr. Shafto's misfortunes, and that, in the midst of his own misfortunes, he had found time to consider whether something might not be done to alleviate those of his friend—for which indeed he felt that he was in some measure responsible. Norma seeming by her silence to acquiesce in this latter statement, he hastened to add that he was only so far responsible that he had given advice

which had turned out to be bad advice. "I was asked for my opinion, and I could only give it. I am sure you will understand, Miss Shafto, that I should not have placed my own money in securities which I had reason to suppose unsafe. Both he and I have been sufferers by the operation of events which could not have been foreseen; but, owing to the fact that my wife is a rich woman, I have not been reduced to such—such penury as he has. I was inexpressibly shocked when I heard that you had been driven to take lodgings in this dismal neighbourhood."

And the baron glanced up and down the street with an air of pity and disgust which was probably quite unaffected. A silk purse cannot be made out of a sow's ear; but it is astonishing how easily the pigskin can be made to forget its origin.

"The neighbourhood suits us very well," answered Norma coldly.

Baron Lämmergeier professed himself quite unable to believe that. He paid

Norma some compliments upon her courage and cheerfulness which very nearly had the effect of causing her to break off the interview without more ado; after which he went on to say that his sympathy with Mr. Shafto's undeserved calamities had led him to quietly open a little "thubthcripthion" for him among his friends, and that he hoped to be able shortly to hand him over a sum which would at least preserve him from want. And it was to announce this good news that he had made his way to the "dismal neighbourhood" of Chelsea.

There are people with whom it is, if not impossible, at any rate not in the least worth while to be angry—people who not only are not themselves gentlemen, but who cannot even understand what it is that constitutes a gentleman. These almost invariably belong to the lower middle class, or have just risen from it. Above and below them are plenty of men more criminal than they, but very few so absolutely contemptible. Of this ignoble

species was Baron Lämmergeier, and Norma knew it; yet his effrontery made her blood boil. If she had been a man, she would perhaps have committed the folly of kicking him; as it was, she used a woman's only weapon.

"You have dared to do that!" she exclaimed; "you have dared to tell my father's friends that he would accept money from them—and money collected by you! I think you must be out of your mind!"

The colour rose to her cheeks; her eyes flashed; in her wrath she seemed to tower above the despicable little rascal, who in truth scarcely knew that he was a rascal at all. He was a trifle cowed, but by no means put to silence.

"My dear young lady," he remonstrated, "you must not be so displeased with me for doing a very natural and proper thing. You have not, perhaps, understood that this is a purely confidential affair—not one which will be talked about in the City or

elsewhere. Merely a few friends who have clubbed together——"

"There is no occasion to say any more," interrupted Norma. "Be so good as to return this money to your friends and to explain to them that when you asked them for it you were acting entirely without authority. Very likely they will have guessed that."

Lämmergeier assumed an air of pained surprise. He had not, he said, expected to be met in that spirit. He had hoped to be able to convey the little gift to its destination in the most delicate manner possible; but since Miss Shafto refused her assistance, he would be obliged to put herself in direct communication with her father.

"You cannot see my father," Norma was beginning, when the words died away upon her lips; for as she spoke she caught sight of Mr. Shafto slowly approaching. It was not his habit to leave the house so early in the day; but perhaps he had been tempted out by the sunshine. In any

case, there he was; and a meeting was inevitable. He had already descried her and her companion and was waving his hand to them. A chilling sensation of fear crept into Norma's heart and made her turn pale. Men, when they are old and ill and feeble, will often do things from which they would shrink if they were in full possession of their faculties; she could not feel at all sure of how her father would receive what seemed to her to be a gross insult.

"Baron Lämmergeier," said she, in a hurried undertone, "if you think that you owe my father a little consideration, and if you wish to show it, you will not speak to him about this impossible scheme of yours. He is not well, and it would upset and distress him to be told that any one had —had ventured to think of offering him money."

Lämmergeier smiled rather disagreeably. "You are a very proud young lady," was his only reply.

And now Mr. Shafto advanced, holding out a shaking hand to the man who had despoiled him. "I should never have expected to meet you in this part of the town," he remarked, smiling. "We don't dislike it, Norma and I. It removes us from our friends as effectually as if we had left the country; but that is just as well. When one has had misfortunes, you know —however, we are very glad if chance brings one of our friends this way, and I hope you will come in and have some luncheon with us, Lämmergeier."

"My dear friend," answered Lämmergeier, who perhaps distrusted the capacities of a lodging-house cook, "I should be delighted; but unluckily I have no time to spare. I only came here in the hope of seeing you for a few minutes, and I am rejoiced to find you bearing your reverses so bravely. Reverses," he continued, with touching gentleness of intonation, "often come upon us when we least deserve them. We must accept them as the—ahem!—the

will of Heaven; but they should not cause us to fly from our friends or to doubt their fidelity."

Thereupon he proceeded to adduce evidence of the fidelity of Mr. Shafto's friends by stating, in a few well-chosen words, the nature of the "testimonial" (for as such he was pleased to describe it) which he had been instrumental in getting up.

Norma, in an agony of apprehension, tried to attract her father's attention; but the old man did not raise his eyes from the ground until his would-be benefactor had ceased speaking. Then he answered quietly, "I am obliged to you, Lämmergeier, and to those who have joined with you—perhaps you will thank them for me?—but probably they do not realize that, although I am a pauper, I am not a bankrupt. I should have thought indeed that you yourself had a prior claim upon their generosity; for of course your entire assets must be handed over to your creditors."

Lämmergeier's dark skin flushed slightly. "I am not in want," said he; "I have my wife's fortune, which the creditors cannot touch."

"Oh, I beg pardon! It is out of your wife's fortune, then, that you kindly proposed to relieve me?"

"My wife," Lämmergeier declared, "is as anxious to be of a little service to you as I am, my dear Mr. Shafto."

"Yes? Well, I am glad of that—I am very glad of that. Because, although I cannot accept what you offer me, there are others who may not be in a position to refuse it, and I hope you will now turn your thoughts to them."

"Others?" repeated Lämmergeier, with a frown. "I don't quite follow you. What others?"

"I mean the people who, like myself, placed money in your hands unreservedly, and whom you cannot be legally compelled to reimburse. I am told that there are a good many such people, and

that some of them have lost their last penny."

"I have no doubt that you have been told a pack of lies," retorted Lämmergeier angrily. "Do you wish me to give you a strict account of the sums which I invested on your behalf? I offered to do so when I saw you last, but you would not listen to me. The papers are at your disposal whenever you care to examine them. I court the fullest inquiry."

Mr. Shafto smiled. "It would be useless, Lämmergeier; I have lost my head for figures; I can't add two and two together."

"Then allow me to say, Mr. Shafto, that you have no right to bring injurious accusations against me. You must substantiate or withdraw them."

The old man laughed a little. "I cannot oblige you by doing either," he replied, "and I doubt whether you will try to make me. If you won't be persuaded to come in to luncheon, I will wish you good

morning now. I find that I can't stand long without getting tired."

With that, he took his daughter's arm and shuffled away, Lämmergeier making no effort to detain him.

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. SHAFTO ENJOYS HIMSELF.

"I AM so glad!" whispered Norma, squeezing her father's arm, as they walked down the street together.

"Glad of what, my dear?" inquired Mr. Shafto.

If she could have spoken the thought that was in her mind, she would have answered that she had been glad to find he had still a little spirit left in him; but since it was not possible to be so candid, she only replied, "I am glad you let that wretch see that you know him for what he is."

"I trust I was not insulting," said Mr. Shafto anxiously.

"No, indeed! you were just what you

ought to have been. It was he who was insulting. I can't understand his having the face to come to you with such a proposal!"

"I doubt his having meant it for an insult," said Mr. Shafto meditatively. "Most likely he thought I was starving. I must say for Lämmergeier that he has always been very kind to me personally, and I really believe that he has a liking for me."

"Yet he robbed you."

"Do you think so, my dear? Well, yes; perhaps he did—I suppose he did."

"And as for his reason for getting up this subscription," continued Norma, who was still much incensed, "one can easily guess what that was. He wanted to be able to say that, so far from being his victim, you were his pensioner. Probably it is of some importance to him to clear his character, and he still thinks that he can do it."

Mr. Shafto glanced at her in mild sur-

prise and shook his head; but whether he meant to dissent from his daughter's estimate of Baron Lämmergeier or to imply that that unscrupulous person's character was past rehabilitation he did not explain.

During luncheon he was, as usual, silent and pensive; but he said that he was feeling better than he had done for some time past, and afterwards, instead of seating himself in an armchair and dropping asleep, in accordance with what had become his custom, he suggested that, as the afternoon was fine and not too hot, they might take a stroll down towards the river.

Some people are able to think the river at Chelsea beautiful; and no doubt beauty of a kind is discoverable almost anywhere, unless it be in the manufacturing districts; but those who are acquainted with the upper reaches of the Thames can scarcely contemplate it with pleasure as it draws near to its destination. Mr. Shafto, gazing at the dirty, turbid flood, sighed, and his

thoughts went back to Eton and Oxford and to many a bygone contest of which the heroes were dead and forgotten.

"Poor old river!" he said; "it comes to an ugly end, like most of us, and the sooner it gets out to sea and is washed clean the better. Well, I shall have got out to sea soon." And after a long pause, which Norma did not interrupt, he went on: "Those whom the gods love die young —it sounds absurd; but it's true enough. Isn't it odd that, though we all live such a short time, yet the generality of us contrive to live too long? Look at —— and —— and ——" (here he mentioned the names of some well-known contemporaries of his). "Such fine young fellows as they were half a century ago!—and what are they now? A quarrelsome old law-lord who has a grievance; a Secretary of State, eaten up with senile vanity, whom all his colleagues laugh at, and who hasn't wit enough left to see that they are laughing at him; an ex-politician who employs

himself in writing long jeremiads to the *Times* which nobody reads. If that is what becomes of the big men, what is to be expected of the little ones? Ah, my dear Norma, if I had died ten years ago, or, for the matter of that, five years ago, you wouldn't have had so much reason to be ashamed of me."

"Do you think I am ashamed of you now, papa?" exclaimed Norma. "What have you ever done that I could be ashamed of?"

"I have managed to lose very nearly every farthing that I possessed, my dear."

"But how? By believing in the honesty of a man who has cheated you. There is nothing to be ashamed of in that. The shame is for the cheat."

"Well, I don't know," said Mr. Shafto in the dispassionate tone which had become habitual to him; "there's some shame in allowing one's self to be cheated, I take it. At the same time, I think you are too severe on Lämmergeier perhaps.

He says he can give an account of the investments that he made for me, and I shouldn't wonder if he could. I suppose he must have sailed rather near the wind in assuring me that some of them were as safe as consols; but that is a very different thing from pocketing the money."

"I haven't the slightest doubt that he pocketed the money," said Norma.

Mr. Shafto smiled: the point did not seem to him worth arguing. "Anyway," he resumed, "I have had my deserts; and if that were all it wouldn't matter much. But the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children—their sins and their follies too—and you have to suffer for mine."

"But I don't suffer," Norma declared; "to me poverty doesn't mean suffering at all."

"Ah, so you say, my dear—one must say something. But facts always remain the same, whatever we may say about them; and whether I die to-morrow, or

next month, or next year, it is certain that some day I must leave you alone in the world, with a bare pittance to live upon, whereas I might have left you rich."

"Don't let us talk about that," pleaded Norma. "If one must be left alone in the world it makes very little difference whether one is left rich or poor."

"Oh, it makes a difference—it makes a very great difference. I wish——"

He broke off and remained silent so long that at last Norma asked him what it was that he wished.

"I was only going to say that I wish Walter Sinclair would come and see us," he answered. "Is he out of town, I wonder?"

"Most people are out of town at this time of the year," observed Norma. "Besides, as you were saying this morning, we are effectually removed from our friends now, and it is better that we should be."

"Did I say that? If I did, I wasn't thinking of Sinclair or Loddondale. Well,

I've worried you more than enough about them both, haven't I?—I'll say no more. Do you know what I should like, Norma? I should like to hire a boat and scull you up the river. I really feel as if I could do it."

She did not at first imagine that he was serious; but he looked so wistfully at the water, and the fancy was evidently so strong upon him, that at length, to humour him, she consented; and when they had found what he contemptuously called a tub, he actually did take the sculls and pulled for a short distance towards Wandsworth Bridge, the tide favouring him. But very soon he had to admit that the exertion, slight as it was, was too much for him; so that he was willing enough to change places with Norma, who paddled quietly up stream, while he chatted to her about his school and college days, and the races that he had won, and the revolution that had been effected in every branch of rowing since then.

He was more like himself than she had seen him for many weeks past, and when it was time to go home to dinner, he said laughingly, "We must save up our pocket-money and treat ourselves to a boat every now and then, Norma; I haven't enjoyed anything so much as this since Venice."

He was tired, however, and needed the support of his daughter's arm during the short walk back to their lodgings. "One ought not to let one's self drop into slovenly habits," he said at the door; "but I think, if you'll excuse me, I won't dress for dinner to-night, Norma; I feel more inclined for sleep than food."

He had of late taken to falling asleep so frequently and so suddenly that Norma was not surprised by his non-appearance at the dinner hour. After waiting a while, she went to his door and knocked, but received no answer. It seemed a pity that he should be disturbed; yet since there was nothing that he disliked so much as

cold soup, she made up her mind to go in and rouse him.

He was seated in his armchair, snoring heavily; his head had fallen back, and one side of his face was contracted in a curious way which Norma did not at first notice. Only after repeated and fruitless efforts to wake him did she realize that this was no ordinary sleep, and that the sword which for so long had been suspended over her by a thread had at length fallen.

Nevertheless, the hastily summoned doctor, when he came, did not consider the case a hopeless one. "Oh, if you speak of absolute recovery," he said, in answer to Norma's question, "that is rather too much to expect; but I quite think that your father will recover consciousness, and perhaps also the power of speech. Have you engaged a nurse yet? No? Well, you had better do so; for you can't undertake all that will be required single-handed. I will call again in the

morning; you may feel assured that there is no immediate cause for alarm."

No sane human being would wish to die by inches; yet, oddly enough, most of us seem to wish that those whom we love should do so, and cannot bring ourselves to desire for them the speedy release which we should certainly desire for ourselves. Norma breathed more freely after the doctor's verdict, though she quite understood that a respite was all that he had promised. In obedience to his instructions, she sent for a sick-nurse, who was soon in attendance; but through that first night she preferred to remain by her father's bedside, hoping always that he would come to himself again; and indeed towards morning he did show some symptoms of returning consciousness.

"Quite as much as we could hope for," the doctor, who made his appearance early in the morning, declared. "And now, Miss Shafto, you will go and try to get some sleep, please. If you like to relieve

the nurse for a time during the afternoon, you can do so; but you must not be two nights in succession out of bed, or you will knock yourself up and become useless—which I am sure you would regret."

Norma was in truth knocked up already, as healthy people always are after a long vigil. A few hours of rest restored her, however; and when she returned to her father's room she had the satisfaction of finding that he could recognize her, although he was unable to speak or move. She sat with him for the remainder of the afternoon and did what little there was to be done for him; but he scarcely seemed to notice that she was there. The nurse, who returned soon after six o'clock, was of opinion that he would pull through this attack.

"They very generally do," she observed composedly; "it's more often the second or the third stroke that proves fatal than the first."

The nurse was a very decent sort of

woman; but of course she would have been of little value as a nurse if the probable death of a patient intrusted to her care had greatly distressed her. Norma knew that; yet she felt painfully the lack of a single sympathizing fellow-creature in her trouble, and it was with a heavy heart that she betook herself to the little drawing-room, where a fellow-creature who was full of the sincerest sympathy had been waiting for her more than half an hour.

"I hoped you would not mind my coming in," Walter Sinclair said, as he advanced to meet her. "I came to call upon you, and they told me of Mr. Shafto's illness; so I thought I would wait upon the chance of seeing you and asking whether I could be of any use. Can I be of any use?"

Norma shook her head, though she was grateful to him and glad to see him.

"Nobody can be of any use," she answered quietly.

"Is it so bad as that?"

"Yes, I believe so. He is not dying, they say; but he will never be well again."

There was a pause; after which Walter said, "I'm very sorry." It was not much to say; but then, there was nothing else to be said, and he spoke as if he meant it. By-and-by he resumed: "I needn't tell you how sorry I was to hear of your other misfortunes too. One isn't supposed to speak about these things, is one? But——"

"There is no reason at all why they should not be spoken about," interrupted Norma; "only they are of no consequence now."

"Except that if you needed things, as one must for an invalid—I mean, if you were in any difficulty——" He stopped short, growing red and confused, and feeling how impossible it was to offer her what he wanted to offer.

But she smiled and answered, without any embarrassment, "I know what you mean, and it is very good of you. I should not mind being indebted to you if

there were any necessity for it; only I am glad to say that there is none. I can pay my way quite well."

"Can't I do anything for you, then?" asked Walter, half pleased by an admission which he had not dared to anticipate, half disappointed that he was not to be allowed to take advantage of it.

"You do a great deal by coming to see me," she replied; "it is something to know that one isn't forgotten by one's friends."

He made a mental note of that, but observed: "Your friends would like to feel that they could do a little more for you, though, than just call and ask how you were getting on, like newspaper reporters. Haven't you any small commissions that I might execute?"

"Well, if you would leave some prescriptions to be made up at the chemist's as you pass——"

"Of course I will. And perhaps you would let me send you a few flowers. They brighten up a sick-room, you know,

and I should think it very kind if you would accept them."

She could hardly refuse so modest a request; nor could she help being a little comforted by his anxiety to comfort her. "Why are you still in London?" she asked presently; "I thought everybody had gone away."

"Oh, I'm insignificant enough to be able to disregard the proceedings of everybody. If a humble sculptor mayn't stay in town after Parliament rises, I don't know who may. Besides, I have nowhere else to go."

All this time she had not asked him to sit down, and he guessed that if he wanted to be received again, he must not unduly prolong the present interview. Therefore he took his leave, saying, "I shall call every day to inquire how Mr. Shafto is; but I shan't expect you to see me unless you are inclined. Only you'll remember, won't you, that if I can be of service to you in any possible way, you will be

giving me a real proof of friendship by letting me know of it?"

So he departed; and in the course of the evening there arrived a large basket, containing flowers and grapes, besides a dozen bottles of champagne. Accompanying these latter was an apologetic and explanatory note—"It is so important for invalids to have really good champagne, and good champagne *can't be had* of the wine merchants in these days. This is some that came out of my father's cellar, and I know it is all right—which is my excuse for sending it."

Mr. Shafto drank a little of the champagne. The doctor said it might be good for him and could certainly do him no harm. He rallied to some extent, but did not recover his speech, and how far he was in possession of his senses it was difficult to say. Two days elapsed without any change occurring in his condition, and on each morning Walter Sinclair called to inquire, though he did not ask to see Miss

Shafto. But on the third day Norma, hearing that he was at the door, went downstairs to thank him for his grapes and flowers, of which a fresh supply had now been sent, and after that it came to be an understood thing that they should meet daily for a few minutes.

During these meetings no very interesting or important remarks were exchanged; but such as they were, they were all that Walter Sinclair lived for, while to Norma they became the one event of the twenty-four hours. She had made up her mind that, as a lover, Lord Walter, like Lady Clara Vere de Vere, was "not one to be desired;" but justice compelled her to admit that he was at least a kind and discreet friend.

CHAPTER XV.

A "MELANCHOLY EVENT."

During the weeks that had elapsed since his parting interview with Norma, Basil Morley had been a busy man. He set forth upon what he was pleased to call his "quest" with modest confidence in his ability to bring it to a successful issue and a determination to spare neither time nor pains in securing the proofs demanded of him. First of all he sought out Mr. Green, whom he speedily terrified into obstinate silence; then he went up to London, visited the church in which Bessie Green had been married, and examined the register, which of course told him no more than he already knew; after which he proceeded, in the manner of the modern British detective,

and at about the same rate of speed, to track the married couple from point to point, betaking himself to the various houses in which they had dwelt, consulting the neighbouring tradesmen, and, in short, neglecting no opportunity of setting persons whose interests it might be to mislead him upon their guard. Thus, notwithstanding his patience, pertinacity, and great natural acuteness, he stumbled at length (as the modern British detective also sometimes does) upon the truth. For, as luck would have it, he unearthed, in the course of his researches, a young woman who had been housemaid to the late Mrs. Walter and who was able to give a description of the late Mr. Walter which placed that gentleman's identity beyond a doubt.

Now, Basil Morley was not in the least a dishonest man. So far as he can be said to have had any opinions (and he would have been not less amazed than indignant if anybody had assured him that he really

had none), he probably held that the end justifies the means—expediency being, according to what he imagined to be his creed, the sole reasonable test by which human action can be judged. But one does not so easily emancipate one's self from the trammels of early prejudice; and, as he had never contracted the habit of telling conscious lies, it was obvious to him that he would have to exonerate Lord Walter Sinclair. This necessity was not, however, so painful to him as it would have been earlier in the year; for in the mean time Mr. Shafto had lost his money and Mr. Shafto's daughter had ceased to be an heiress. Such events make a difference. It is, no doubt, a pity that they should; but they do; and what is the good of being a philosopher if one has not the courage to face and recognize plain facts? Mr. Morley's means were limited; he was fond of small luxuries and could not but be aware that the lack of them would exercise a prejudicial influence upon his spirits, his

temper, and consequently upon his general usefulness. Married men may have as many as a dozen children; instances in which that formidable number has actually been exceeded cannot be called rare; and the lot of a poet, with an income of less than a thousand a year and fourteen hungry persons to feed upon it, is almost too dreadful for contemplation. These reflections caused the pensive Basil to feel that Providence had in some measure tempered the wind to the shorn lamb; and it was in a spirit of manly resignation that he sat down to indite the following letter:—

"My dear Miss Shafto,

"When we parted, I told you that I would not see you again until I should be in a position to substantiate the statements which I had made in an article in the *Omniscient Review*, and to which you took exception. To the readers of the article I do not feel that I owe any apology or explanation: the instance which I ad-

duced—so far as they would be able to understand it—is at least sufficiently in harmony with the facts for the purpose of my argument. But to you, alas! I have to confess that I was deceived by evidence which, upon closer scrutiny, has turned out to be fallacious."

Here Mr. Morley related at some length the various incidents of his search, culminating in the discovery that not Lord Walter Sinclair, but his elder brother, had been the culprit whom he had denounced. "It seems unquestionable," he added, "that the late Lady Loddondale was deceived by her husband as to her true rank; but this, I own, is a matter which interests me little. To me the sad, yet certain deduction from all this is that you will now see in Lord Walter Sinclair a man who is not only innocent, not only maligned, but one whose love you were led to spurn through the calumnies of a rival. What can I say? What amends can I make? Only this, it seems to me: I will

be his rival no longer. I withdraw from the contest; I admit that chivalry commands me to do so; I only implore you to pardon my mistaken zeal and to believe that, come what may, I shall always be in heart yours, and only yours,

"BASIL MORLEY."

This missive, which reached Norma one hot morning in the end of August, overwhelmed her with mingled shame and joy. She had, it must be confessed, some reason to feel penitent; but as for feeling unhappy, that was impossible, so great was the relief to her of finding that the best and kindest of her friends was in truth what he appeared to be, and not what she had so absurdly imagined that he was. Hitherto she had always had an uncomfortable feeling that the man whom she saw every day, and whose gifts of flowers and fruit she had not liked to refuse, was not the real Walter Sinclair at all, or at any rate that he was only showing her one

side of himself; but now she perceived, with a great thankfulness, how completely she had misjudged him, and, forgetting that she had brought no overt charge against him which he could have recognized as such, she longed to confess her injustice and to ask his forgiveness. Also she now understood what had been something of a puzzle to her—namely, Lord Loddondale's abrupt abandonment of his oft-declared antipathy to the idea of marriage.

It was perhaps natural enough that she should have felt very angry with that converted misogynist and that she should have held him chiefly responsible for a mistake with which, as a matter of fact, he had had nothing to do. Her anger, however, was of short duration; for presently she took up the *Times*, which was lying on the table, and this was the first paragraph that caught her eye:—

"SUDDEN DEATH OF THE MARQUIS OF LODDONDALE.—We regret to have to an-

nounce that Lord Loddondale expired from heart-disease yesterday, while shooting with a party of friends over his moor in Aberdeenshire. His lordship, who had only recently returned from a yachting cruise to Norway, appeared to be in his usual health up to the moment of his death; but it is believed that he had never fully recovered from injuries sustained in the hunting-field two or three years ago, and that over-exertion was the immediate cause of the melancholy event. The late marquis, who was well known on the turf, was unmarried. He is succeeded in the family honours by his only brother, Lord Walter Sinclair, the sculptor of that exquisite figure of Charity which all Londoners lately saw and admired at Burlington House."

The paper dropped from Norma's hand and her eyes filled with tears. Poor Lord Loddondale had not been exactly an ornament to the peerage, and the writer of the obituary notice had been unable to claim any other distinction for him than that of

having been well known on the turf; but he had been very kind to her, and she had been fond of him, and she did not believe now, as she had been ready to do a few minutes before, that he had deliberately personated his brother. To his brother, too, he had been kind and anxious to be generous; after what had happened, she felt that it would be impossible to make the communication to his brother which she had meant to make that day.

If she had had all her wits about her, she would have realized that she was not very likely to have the chance of so doing; but this did not occur to her at the moment. Indeed she was still waiting, in expectation of Walter's appearance, when a telegram, dated Edinburgh, was brought to her, in which he stated briefly that he had been summoned to Scotland and would write further particulars as soon as possible.

The reason of his journey he did not mention; for he knew that the daily papers would inform her of that, and there are

things which one does not confide to a telegraph clerk unless one is obliged. Besides, he had an irrational hope that the news might turn out to be false. To receive bad news with incredulity is the natural impulse of most people, and it seemed very unlikely that a strong fellow like Loddondale, who had never had a day's illness in his life, except as the result of hunting or steeplechase accidents, who had always kept himself in hard condition, and who had been able to stand any amount of fatigue, should have dropped down dead in the prime of his manhood, as he was said to have done. Unlikely things, however, happen almost as often as likely ones, and death is one of the things which are never in reality unlikely to happen to anybody. When Walter reached his brother's shooting-lodge that evening, he found that the visitors who had been staying there had already departed and that the local doctor was anxiously awaiting his arrival and instructions.

Le roi est mort; vive le roi! One does not need to be a king to have experienced the melancholy irony of that saying. The late marquis had not been unpopular with his many dependents, amongst whom he had borne the character of a just, though somewhat hard-headed and close-fisted master; but they had not particularly loved him, and of course the first thing to be done was to show proper deference and respect to his successor, at whose unaffected grief they were a little surprised.

Well, naturally they could know nothing of all the memories of long-past school-days which crowded upon Walter as he stood sadly looking down at what had been his brother. Warbury had fought his battles for him once or twice, he remembered, and had then left him to shift for himself, telling him that he must learn to stand up against moderate odds. Warbury had always been a great stickler for fair play—a thorough Anglo-Saxon, taking advantage of no man, but not much inclined to give

any man more than was his due. "Yet he was liberal enough to me," Walter thought. "He wanted to allow me a thousand a year; and that day, after the bazaar, he would have retired in my favour if I had asked him to do it. And I never gave him a word of thanks or told him what a good fellow I thought him."

He was not allowed to indulge long in such profitless musings. There were arrangements to be made and half a dozen people awaiting his orders—the house-steward, who had been sent for from Loddondale; the butler; the doctor, who wanted to explain to him that there would be no need for an inquest; as well as others.

He did mechanically what was required of him, and accepted most of the suggestions which were submitted to his approval. In the course of the evening the valet requested an audience. "If you please, my lord, these are his lordship's keys, in case your lordship should wish to look at

any papers there may be in the despatch-box or the drawers of the writing-table. And should we telegraph to Edinburgh or London for the undertaker, my lord? I beg your lordship's pardon, but the doctor wished me to say that no time should be lost."

Perhaps, of all the miserable duties that devolve upon a dead man's near relations, there is none which goes so much against the grain as that of looking through his papers. One cannot rid one's self of the feeling that it is an underhand and dishonourable act; yet it has to be done; and Walter, when he was left alone, set to work to do it. Thus it came to pass that the very first thing that he found was a letter addressed to himself in his brother's handwriting, with the superscription: "To be opened after my death." It was dated some eighteen months back—that is to say, soon after the late Lord Loddondale had come into his title—and the brief statement which it contained caused its reader no

small surprise. Being so short, it may be subjoined here.

"DEAR WALTER,

"From what the doctors tell me, I expect my life is not a very safe one, and as you will succeed me, I think you should know that I am married. My wife is not a lady; she is a niece of old Green, who keeps the Shafto Arms at Brampton; I dare say you don't remember him. She and I haven't hit it off together, and have agreed to live apart. There are no children; and I have just arranged for the transfer of a considerable sum of money to her, so that she will have no claim upon the estate. Of course, if she chooses to call herself Lady Loddondale, she can; but I understand that she has no such wish, and certainly it would be better to keep the thing quiet. At present she goes by the name of Mrs. Walter. That reminds me to say that when I first made acquaintance with her I took the liberty of assuming

your name. It wasn't a very straight thing to do; but I had my reasons at the time, and I don't suppose it can have injured you in any way. My wife very soon found out who I really was. I wanted you to know about this because a man can't tell what may happen after his death, and though I am pretty sure that she won't trouble you, her relations possibly might. There is no occasion for any mystery about the business; only I would just as soon that people didn't hear what an ass I have made of myself.

"Your affectionate brother,

"LODDONDALE."

This revelation did not in itself astonish Walter for more than a few minutes; for he had often fancied that there must be some reason for the irritation which his brother had been wont to display when urged to marry; but what at first puzzled him exceedingly was the undoubted fact that Loddondale had recently asked Miss

Shafto to be his wife. Then, all of a sudden, the circumstances of the case brought back Basil Morley's article in the *Omniscient Review* to his mind; and so by degrees many things became plain to him which had hitherto been obscure. These were of a nature to give him some satisfaction and some pain. If, as he now suspected, Norma had identified him with the heartless personage who had served to point Mr. Morley's moral, that was a misapprehension which could easily be removed; but, on the other hand, it was not a very pleasant reflection that she had been so willing to think evil of him, nor did it seem likely that she would have so thought of any man for whom she had much regard. Upon the whole, the surmise which had suggested itself to him added so little to his hopes of ultimate success that he almost doubted whether it would be worth while to let Miss Shafto know of an affair which his brother had evidently wished to keep secret.

For the time being, however, he was obliged to postpone all consideration of that question; and indeed it was more than a week before he was able to recur to it. During that interval he had to see to the transfer of his brother's remains to the family vault at Loddondale and to take his part in the dismal funeral pageant prescribed by custom. Then came the reading of the will, which was of quite recent date, and which produced a certain sensation among the assembled relatives. From the various bequests made, it appeared that the amount of the personalty at the testator's disposal must be considerably larger than had been anticipated; but this was probably owing to successes on the turf, of which nobody but himself had been aware. The really surprising thing in the document was its final clause, in virtue of which Norma Shafto, besides receiving thirty thousand pounds down, was constituted residuary legatee.

"Upon my word, the girl couldn't have

done much better if she had gone the length of marrying him!" one disappointed cousin exclaimed, and added that really that sort of thing was a little bit compromising, don't you know. "I'm not at all sure that I should allow a daughter of mine to accept it."

But Walter hoped that Mr. Shafto would be less scrupulous. It is an understood thing that one may accept from the dead what one must not accept from the living, and he rejoiced to think that by this unexpected windfall the woman whom he loved would at least be placed beyond the reach of economical worries. In any case, he himself was now rich enough to be able to dispense with thirty thousand pounds, or even double that amount. Later in the day he had a talk with the family lawyer, to whom he thought it best to mention the letter which he had discovered in Scotland.

"Yes,. yes," the lawyer said; "it was an unfortunate business. However, the woman died four or five months ago, and luckily she had no family. She was hand-

somely provided for by your poor brother—too handsomely in my opinion. I should have thought that an allowance for life would have met all the requirements of the case; but he took a different view. She was troublesome in some ways; though perhaps not so troublesome as she might have been. Her determination to settle at Brampton was particularly annoying."

"Oh, she settled at Brampton, did she?" said Walter.

"Yes, she spent the last months of her life there with her relations, and I doubt whether she kept her own counsel as rigidly as she led us to suppose that she was doing. At least, we have been informed that a busybody of the name of Morley, who lives in that neighbourhood, has been prosecuting inquiries about her. You may know him, perhaps?"

"I have met him," answered Walter briefly.

"And with Miss Shafto you are acquainted, of course? Your poor brother

was not a man of whom one could venture to ask questions; but I confess that his will excited my curiosity. I wonder whether it is the case, as I am assured that it is, that the lady refused an offer of marriage from him a short time ago."

But the lawyer's curiosity received as little encouragement from the present as it had from the late Lord Loddondale, and he was at once politely given to understand that the interview might now close.

CHAPTER XVI.

MR. SHAFTO IS NOT CONTRADICTED.

As time went on, Mr. Shafto slowly rallied from the attack which had brought him so near to death. He took notice of what went on around him, he began to talk a little, and liked Norma to read the newspapers to him. However, it did not seem to her that he regained much strength, and one day she asked the doctor plainly whether there was any chance of his recovery.

"Well, in a certain sense he has recovered," the doctor replied. "If you ask me whether he will ever leave his room again, that is another thing. I doubt it; but at the same time I should be sorry to express a positive opinion one way or the

other. In such cases as his a good deal depends upon the patient's constitution, and something perhaps upon his will. Many people come back to life from sheer determination not to die."

If that were so, Norma thought, the chances ought to be in her father's favour; for it was certain that he did not wish to die. As consciousness and more power of connected thought returned to him, he grew restless and uneasy, his eyes always scanning the doctor's face with an eager, unspoken question; while to Norma he whispered again and again, "Am I getting better? Do you think I am really getting better?"

She did not think so, and it pained her a little to watch that desperate clinging to a frail existence which distinguishes those who believe themselves to be possessed of immortal souls from the lower animals. But it must be said for poor Mr. Shafto that, although he may have been to some extent under the influence of that rather

ignoble instinct from which none of us can venture to pronounce ourselves free until we have been brought face to face with death, it was not on his own account chiefly that he desired to remain a little longer in the world.

"What is to become of you after I am gone, my dear?" he would ask, in his slow, laboured utterance; and she could not reassure or comfort him, though she said all that it was possible to say.

The prospect in truth was not a reassuring one, nor could she herself help dreading it. It is bad enough for a man to be quite alone in the world; but it is doubtless worse for a woman—unless indeed she be a rich woman, in which case she is not likely to remain alone long. And this unfortunately was the one clear idea which held possession of Mr. Shafto's confused brain.

"Ah, if you had money!" he would sigh, in answer to her assurances that she was very well able to take care of herself.

"But you have no money. It is all gone —all gone!"

She had said nothing to him about Lord Loddondale's death: for obvious reasons she thought it better to mention neither his name nor that of Walter Sinclair. From the latter she had received a long letter, written immediately after his arrival in Aberdeenshire, in which he expressed his intention of returning to London as soon as he should be able to do so, and begged her to be so kind as to send him a line on a post-card every day to say how things were going with her. With this request she complied, but she heard no more from him until one morning when the post brought her communications both from him and from the late Lord Loddondale's lawyers, conveying to her the intelligence that she was once more an heiress. It may be that, under other circumstances, she would have felt the delicacy claimed for himself by Lord Loddondale's disappointed kinsman and that she would

have hesitated to accept so large a legacy from a man with whom she had not been connected; but as matters stood, she could only think of the relief that she would now be able to give to her father. She hastened into his bedroom, with the letters in her hand, and somewhat too precipitately announced her good news.

"You need not be unhappy about me any more, papa; I have come into a fortune!"

He did not in the least understand her, nor did he seem able to follow her hurried explanation of the events which had occurred. Only, after she had repeated to him four or five times that Lord Loddondale was dead, he smiled feebly. "No, no, my dear," he answered; "young Loddondale isn't dead. You are thinking of his father." And he paid no heed to her repeated assurances that she was now amply provided for, but presently recurred to the old weary plaint—"What is to become of you when I am gone, my dear?

—what is to become of you when I am gone?"

"Really, ma'am, I think you had better leave him alone," said the nurse, who had now come into the room; "he has had a bad night, and you only distress him. I don't think he knows what he is saying, and I'm sure he don't know what you are saying to him."

Norma retired, discomfited. There was not much use in having riches unless her riches enabled her to set her father's mind at ease, and she now began to think that perhaps she ought not to let herself be enriched in that way. Walter had written very kindly, and had seemed to consider the matter one for congratulation; but, after all, the money would virtually come out of his pocket, and she was not sure that she cared to be so much indebted to anybody. Besides, her personal wants were so modest that the small fortune which she would inherit from her father would more than suffice to satisfy them.

And so, when Walter, who had not lost much time in following his letter to London, called upon her that afternoon, he found her in rather low spirits.

"There is very little change; but what there is is rather for the worse, I think," she said, in answer to his first inquiry. "I have no hope now, and often I wish that his troubles were over. It is so miserable to feel that one can do absolutely nothing for him! The happiest thing is to die as your brother did, without an hour's illness."

"Perhaps it is. I remember he used to say that he would rather meet his end in the hunting-field than anywhere else. But that doesn't make it the less sad that his life should have been taken from him so early, and just when life was beginning to go more smoothly with him too." He added, after a moment, "I never did Loddondale justice; he was a much better brother to me than I was to him. One finds these things out when it is too late."

"I am sure you have nothing to reproach yourself with," said Norma; "but I do think that he was fond of you and wanted to do anything that he could to befriend you."

She paused, feeling that this subject could not be pursued much further; and, as he made no rejoinder, there was silence for a minute or two. This was broken by a somewhat abrupt query from Norma. "Do people ever refuse legacies?" she asked.

"I can't tell you," answered Walter, smiling; "I have never heard of an instance of such a thing being done."

"But I suppose they can refuse, if they wish?"

"Oh, no doubt they can, if they wish; but it is not easy to imagine why any one should ever wish to do so."

"Well, reasons are conceivable, I think. One might not particularly want money, and one might think that one had no business to take it away from those to whom it

ought to belong. A residuary legatee is a person who receives what remains over out of an estate after all bequests have been paid, is he not? It stands to reason that you, and not I, ought to be in that position with regard to your brother's estate."

"But he didn't think so, you see."

"I may be allowed to think so, though. The truth is that it wouldn't make me any happier to be an heiress now. I know why he left me all this money, and I am very grateful to him for his kindness; but, as things have fallen out, it comes too late. My father didn't even understand what I meant when I told him about it."

"But you will be able to make him understand by-and-by, I hope," said Walter. "Anyhow, I think poor Loddondale's wishes ought to be taken into consideration; and you must remember that if you don't want the money, nobody else does. As for me, my difficulty will be to know how to spend my income."

Norma was going to make some reply, when the nurse came in to ask if she could speak to her for a moment.

"He's very fretful and restless," the woman said, as soon as they were out in the passage. "He recognized the gentleman's voice, and wants most particularly to speak to him. Could you bring him in for a few minutes, do you think, ma'am? We shall have another bad night if you don't, I'm sure."

Norma was not very anxious to comply with her father's request, for she was a little afraid of what he might say; but at the same time she did not see how she could refuse, and in communicating his wish to Walter she was careful to explain that he was not in full possession of his faculties.

"His mind wanders a good deal at times," she said; "so you must not be surprised if he talks nonsense. The best plan is just to agree with him, as if it were a matter of course."

"I quite understand," answered Walter, who in truth could guess to what her warning probably referred; "I won't contradict him or distress him, whatever he may say."

So, without further words, he was conducted into the bedroom where the old man was sitting up in bed, supported by pillows. Mr. Shafto's cheeks had a faint flush upon them; his eyes were bright and opened wide; he welcomed his visitor with a smile, and seemed to know very well what he was about.

"This is kind of you, Sinclair," said he; "I thought you wouldn't refuse to say good-bye to an old friend. You can go away, nurse, until we ring for you."

Walter took the trembling hand which was stretched out to him, and which was hot and dry—an odd symptom, the doctor might have thought. "Well, Sinclair," Mr. Shafto went on, "I'm very near the finish, as you see, and I want to say a

word or two to you while I can. A dying man may say what he pleases, you know; he needn't be afraid of giving offence any more."

"You certainly won't offend me," Walter declared; "but I hope you are not dying. You look a great deal better than I expected to see you."

"Do I? I am dying all the same, my dear boy. I had my notice to quit served upon me some time ago, and I should be glad enough to get to my rest if it were not for Norma. That's what I wanted to speak to you about—about Norma."

"I am sure you know——" began Walter, rather confusedly; but the old man interrupted him before he could finish a sentence which in truth he would have found some difficulty in ending.

"Yes, I know—of course I know; and there's no reason why we shouldn't talk about it openly. I was very sorry for what happened in Venice; it was a misfortune and—and a mistake. But I have

thought a great deal about it since; and if you are still in the same mind—— Are you still in the same mind?"

Walter did not reply immediately. He felt sure that Norma would not wish him to reply to such a question if he could avoid doing so; but then again he had promised that he would not distress her father; and, after all, nothing that might pass during this interview would be in any way binding upon her. So he said gravely, "I shall always be in the same mind as long as I live, Mr. Shafto."

"Then I may tell you something that I couldn't otherwise have said. She does care for you, Sinclair, and she has never cared for any one but you. Why she refused you I don't know—that's for you to find out—but I know why she refused your brother. I guessed at the time, and I have noticed things since — but my memory fails me, and I had better not try to go into particulars. It was only when I heard you in the next room that every-

thing seemed to become clear to me all of a sudden."

Here he paused; and Walter, in grievous perplexity, remained silent.

"Can you tell me that it will be all right?" Mr. Shafto asked anxiously. "I know there's a great deal more to be said; but I've no time and no strength. Can you just tell me that it will be all right?"

To such an appeal Walter could not refuse to respond. "Yes," he answered; "I can honestly tell you that you need have no fear about your daughter's future. Don't let it trouble you any longer."

Evasive though the answer was, it satisfied the old man, who fell back upon his pillows with a sigh. "Good-bye, then," he said; "good-bye, and God bless you both! Perhaps, if I have brought you together, you will think that I have made some amends." He repeated once or twice faintly, "some amends," and then closed his eyes, as if he had no more to say.

Norma made a sign to Walter, who followed her out of the room, and who appeared to be even more disconcerted than she.

"I hope you did not mind my speaking as I did," he began the moment that they were outside the door; "we agreed, you know, that he was not to be contradicted."

"Oh, you were quite right," she answered hurriedly; "you couldn't have said anything else. I won't ask you to stay any longer now; I must go back to my father."

He had no choice but to accept his dismissal, reluctant though he was to be dismissed without a syllable of explanation having been vouchsafed to him. As he went his way pensively down Cheyne Walk, however, he was able to take a little comfort from the thought that Norma had at least not denied her father's assertions. Whether this was because she could not do so, or because she did not consider them worth denying, was a question which he

examined from every possible point of view in the course of the evening, and which he had not succeeded in answering to his satisfaction when he went to bed.

CHAPTER XVII.

TIMELY HOSPITALITY.

By eleven o'clock the next morning Walter was on his way towards Chelsea again. He had intended to defer his visit until the afternoon, but had found his patience unequal to the demand made upon it; besides, after what had passed on the previous day, it seemed only right that he should make inquiries as to the invalid's condition as early as might be. For his own part, he did not believe that Mr. Shafto was very near death, for he had been surprised by the clearness of the old man's voice, and his appearance of strength. "I shouldn't wonder if he were to linger on for some months yet, poor old fellow!" he thought. "I wonder whether it would

be possible to get him moved out of those cramped lodgings."

This again set him wondering whether Norma was really serious in desiring to renounce her inheritance, and he determined to point out to her that if she did so, she would be depriving her father of comforts which might very likely prolong his life, besides showing a somewhat contemptuous disregard for the last wishes of one who had supposed himself entitled to the privileges of a friend. These arguments, Walter thought, would probably suffice for their purpose; for Norma was always reasonable. Reasonableness is not exactly what one expects in a woman, nor, it must be confessed, are reasonable women often charming into the bargain. It was just because Norma was both that she stood apart, and could be compared with no other human being whom he had ever met. That, at least, was what he thought; but as he would have thought so whatever her personal qualities might have happened

to be, his opinion was not perhaps worth much. In any case, thinking about her made his walk pleasant to him, added to which, Mr. Shafto's assertions may have caused him to feel more hopeful than he believed himself to be; so that he reached his destination in a tolerably cheerful frame of mind.

The nurse, who opened the door for him, did not respond to his smile, and answered his cheerful question of, "Well, how is Mr. Shafto this morning?" with a shake of her head.

"It's all over, sir," she said quietly.

"You don't mean that he is dead!" exclaimed Walter, starting.

"Yes, sir; he passed away in his sleep just before sunrise. I don't think he spoke a sensible word after you left yesterday. He was feverish and wandering for an hour or two, and then he got off to sleep and never woke again. One couldn't wish him to have had a more peaceful end, poor gentleman!"

"And Miss Shafto?" asked Walter, after a pause.

"Oh, she's rather upset, sir; that was only to be expected. But of course she was prepared for what has happened."

Walter reflected for a few moments. "There will be things that must be attended to," he observed presently, "and I suppose she has no one to help her. Do you think she would see me?"

The nurse thought it doubtful, but said she would inquire. "What name am I to say, sir?"

Walter produced one of his cards, thereby greatly increasing the interest which the nurse took in him. That this young gentleman was an admirer of Miss Shafto's she had not doubted; but that he was nothing less than a marquis was a revelation to her, and she naturally felt that admirers of that exalted rank ought not to be turned away from the door. Nevertheless, it was thus that she was compelled regretfully to treat him, after a short

colloquy with Norma. "Miss Shafto said I was to thank you very much, my lord," she announced on her return; "but she don't feel equal to seeing any one to-day." She added, on her own account, "Perhaps your lordship might be able to call again to-morrow."

"Of course I will," answered Walter; "but can't you tell me of any way in which I might be of use at once? I think, for instance, that Miss Shafto will probably wish that her father should be buried in the country, near their own home, and if so, somebody ought to see about making the arrangements."

The nurse believed not. She understood that the funeral was to take place at the Brompton Cemetery, and that the doctor had promised to do what was necessary. "However, I dare say Miss Shafto would like to talk it over with you, my lord."

And when Walter presented himself on the following day, Norma was persuaded to receive him. He found her composed,

but very sad and not at all like herself. For a long time past she had known that her father's life hung by a thread; but she had not thought much about what would happen after he should have been taken from her, and now she was overpowered by a sense of utter loneliness.

"No; I have no feeling of that kind," she answered, when Walter suggested that she might wish her father to be laid beside his ancestors; "I don't think it matters at all what becomes of our bodies after we are dead. And there would be difficulties —and I suppose also expense."

"But that is not of so much consequence now," Walter ventured to observe.

She passed her hand across her forehead and sighed wearily: perhaps she did not care to discuss that point. "I don't think he would have wished it," she said. "If it depends upon me, I would rather not."

With regard to all details, however, she was willing enough to let Walter act for her, and grateful to him for the matter-

of-course way in which he requested permission to do so.

"If you had any relation at hand, of course I would not push myself forward," he explained; "but at such times as this there is always a great deal to be done which only a man can do, and which you ought not to be burdened with. I can undertake that without disturbing you at all, and any instructions that you may wish to give me can easily be delivered through the servants. Now I won't stay any longer, for I know you are not inclined to talk."

Probably she would have hesitated more about accepting his friendly services if she had felt able to dispense with them; but she was really unwell and half stunned by her loss; so that she hardly knew what was expected of her or what her immediate duties were. After this, he called every morning, but did not even ask to see her until the day before that appointed for the funeral, when he sent in a message to the

effect that he would be glad to speak to her for a few minutes, if she didn't mind. She not only did not mind, but was by this time very anxious to see and thank him.

"You have been more than good to me!" she exclaimed, as he entered; "I don't know what I should have done without you."

"I have only done what was very easy to me and would have been troublesome and painful to you," answered Walter. "Of course I wanted to spare you unnecessary worries, if I could. But now I have come to worry you a little, because I must. First of all, about to-morrow: you would like to be present, would you not?"

"Oh yes, I should like to be present."

"So I supposed; and I have arranged accordingly. And afterwards—have you thought of what you will do?"

"No; not yet," answered Norma, her lips quivering a little. "I have tried to

think about it, but I hadn't the courage. Must I decide at once?"

"I don't think there is any need for you to make any definite decision for a long time to come; only I am sure you ought not to stay where you are. It would not be good for you, and none of your friends would wish it. So my aunt wants you, if you will, to go to her in Arlington Street to-morrow. She has a large house, and you would have your own sitting-room, and, in short, you could do exactly as you please. At this time of year you would be in no danger of being bothered by visitors. She begged me to say that if you would take up your quarters with her until you could see your way to make some plans for the future, you would do her a real kindness. And that isn't merely a polite message; it's the simple truth. She would have come to see you herself, but I told her I thought you would rather be left alone until after to-morrow."

"It is very kind of her," answered

Norma doubtfully; "but I don't know—I thought she had left town long ago."

"Oh, so she did; but she has come back again. She often makes her appearance in London at unexpected times," said Walter, who did not think it necessary to mention that he had summoned Lady Spencer from the country, and that this offer of hospitality had been instigated by him.

Norma consented without very much further persuasion. The prospect of returning to those lonely Chelsea lodgings had, in truth, been rather terrible to her; and she had, besides, a woman's natural longing to hold a consultation with some one of her own sex. Lady Spencer was kind and sensible, and would at any rate be able to give her disinterested advice with regard to certain matters as to which she did not see her way very clearly. She thought there would be no harm in her going to Arlington Street for a week, by the end of which time she would probably have made up her mind what to do next.

It is not perhaps possible to make a funeral anything but a lugubrious rite, nor is the "sure and certain hope" of which the Burial Service speaks ever likely to become as prominent in accessories as the sorrow of survivors; but in this country we are gradually emancipating ourselves from the thraldom of the grotesque, and Walter, as well as other friends of poor old Mr. Shafto's, had done what was possible, by means of an abundance of flowers, towards lessening the dismalness of a ceremony which, after all, ought at least not to be dismal. And what touched Norma to a degree which these other friends probably did not at all realize was that they had not contented themselves with sending wreaths and crosses, but had journeyed up from Stourshire in order to pay the last tribute of respect that they could to their old neighbour. When, through the mist of her tears, she saw all those familiar faces grouped round the open grave—the rosy-cheeked, white-whiskered squires, the

Rector of Brampton in his surplice, Sir Christopher Shearman, looking regretful and subdued—and when she felt the silent sympathy that their presence expressed, it seemed to her that the world, which she had thought so empty, was really full of dear, kind-hearted people, who had not forgotten her, though necessity had separated them from her. She would have liked to shake hands with them all and say a word or two to each of them, only she could not trust herself to speak.

Well, it is not quite certain that they would have come if they had not received a hint from their powerful fellow-landowner, the new Marquis of Loddondale; but, at any rate, there they were, and they were very sorry that poor Shafto was gone, and very glad to hear that his daughter had inherited a fortune. No doubt, as they travelled homewards together in the afternoon, they discussed the curious matter of Norma's inheritance, and had something to say about the almost ostenta-

tious fashion in which the brother of her benefactor had assumed the direction of her affairs. And if the conclusion at which they professed to arrive was that the present Lord Loddondale was no fool, and that he knew better than to let a good lump of money slip through his fingers, it may be taken for granted that they thought none the worse of him on that account. But Norma, who knew them all to be good, simple men, did not know that it is the habit of good, simple men, when conversing together, to make themselves out terrible sceptics and to impute to others motives of action which, if they really believed in them, would cause their eyes to start out of their simple heads with horror.

"How kind they all are!" she exclaimed, as she drove away from the cemetery with Walter, who had rather timidly offered to escort her as far as Arlington Street. "I hope they did not think me ungrateful. I wonder whether you could manage to

find an opportunity of thanking them for me?"

He could certainly manage so easy a matter as that, he said. What was there, easy or difficult, which he would not have managed for her? And what greater pleasure could she give him than to intrust him with the carrying out of any of her wishes? This, however, he did not say, being in great fear of seeming to presume too much. He left her at Lady Spencer's door, and she was at once conducted upstairs to a pretty little sitting-room overlooking the Park. Adjoining it was a bedroom, in which she found that her belongings had already been unpacked and arranged. Nobody disturbed her until evening, when Lady Spencer put her head in at the door and asked whether she might come in.

"I don't know how to thank you," Norma began, after the old lady had kissed her and had sat down beside her.

"Then don't do it," Lady Spencer re-

turned. "You have nothing to thank me for, my dear; you ought to know, if anybody does, that to be able to be of some little use to one's neighbours is one of the luxuries of life. Besides, I hate to be alone; and nowadays I am almost always alone. Not, of course, that I expect you to see any more of me than you feel inclined. You are to do just what you like, please, and have your meals in your own room, if you prefer it. To-night, at any rate, I mean to have your dinner sent up to you, because I know you won't want to be stared at by the servants."

Norma confessed that if, for once, she might be allowed to avail herself of that privilege, she would be grateful. Lady Spencer did not remain with her much longer; but before she went to bed her hostess reappeared, and then the two women had a talk together, from which the younger derived a good deal of comfort.

Lady Spencer, it seemed, had heard

about the late Lord Loddondale's marriage; so that Norma could express the contrition which she felt for the unjust suspicions that she had entertained of Walter. "I feel as if I ought to beg his pardon," she said.

"Well, if you ask me," answered Lady Spencer, with a slight smile, "I think perhaps you ought. He will probably forgive you."

"I don't know—I should find it rather hard to forgive any friend of mine who had had such thoughts about me. Still, that is no reason for shirking it. Only——"

She paused; because there was another obvious difficulty which she did not like to put into words; but Lady Spencer spared her the embarrassment of mentioning it.

"I was sure," observed the latter composedly, "that there was some cause which didn't appear upon the surface for your rejection of poor Walter at Venice; and it seems that I was right."

"But I don't at all wish him to think

that," interposed Norma anxiously; "if he thought that that was what I meant, he would naturally suppose—in fact, I couldn't speak to him upon the subject at all if there were any danger of his thinking so."

"Oh, well, I dare say he won't think so," returned Lady Spencer, suppressing an inclination to laugh. "Indeed, it is pretty certain that he will think whatever you want him to think: he generally does."

Norma could only trust that he might; but, after all, the limit of any one's influence over a fellow-creature must be reached somewhere, and when she mentioned her feeling that she ought to hand over the money which had been bequeathed to her by the late Lord Loddondale to the present holder of the title, Lady Spencer was unable to give her any hope of Walter's being brought to consider such a proceeding reasonable or feasible.

"I quite admit," the old lady said, "that it is a little awkward for you; I quite admit that, when poor Loddondale's will is pub-

lished, people will say that he must either have been engaged to you or have wanted to marry you (which, to be sure, is the truth); but then I don't see how you can evade that by giving up what is now yours. The will exists and can't be altered. My own opinion, if I may be allowed to offer it, is that it would be ungracious and ungrateful on your part to treat the will as a dead letter. At any rate, if you do so, you will have to give the money to a charity; for it would evidently be impossible for Walter to accept such a present from you, even if he wished to accept it."

There was a little further discussion; but Lady Spencer did not seem particularly anxious to enforce her views. "Well," she ended by saying, "you had better talk it over with Walter, who is sure to look in some time to-morrow. You and he must arrange your differences between you; I have noticed that you are neither of you very amenable to the advice of your friends."

CHAPTER XVIII.

NORMA BEGS PARDON.

"I THINK," observed Lady Spencer to her nephew, who called upon her on the following afternoon, "that when you come to the question of jointure, you ought, in justice to yourself, to remember that your wife has already been placed in possession of a considerable slice out of the family revenues. Thirty thousand down is a solid fact, and I don't know how much more there may not be to follow."

Walter waved away these sordid details with an impatient gesture. "Do you really think that there is hope for me, then?" he asked eagerly.

"I will go so far as to say that I do," replied Lady Spencer; "and what makes

my opinion so valuable is that I didn't think so at the time when you were more sanguine. Go upstairs and talk to her; she has a great many things to say to you. Amongst others, she wants, I believe, to tell you that she cannot possibly take the thirty thousand pounds in question."

"Oh, but she must."

"Very well; it is for you to convince her of that. At the end of an hour, or even two hours, you will find me here, ready to do what I can for you in the way of congratulations and benedictions. I wouldn't for the world hurry you; still, if you could manage to get things settled to-day, it would be convenient. You see, I don't exactly enjoy being in London just now."

Walter laughed a little nervously. He did not share his aunt's confident expectations; for he knew, what people of her age are rather apt to forget, that love is not to be commanded by considerations of expediency, and that the fact of his being

now so eligible a suitor would not influence Norma in the least in his favour. However, it was useless to dwell upon such points; so presently he went upstairs to try his fortune for the second and last time.

Norma greeted him with a coldness and formality which made his heart sink; though if he had been in a condition of mind to study her dispassionately, he might have taken that as an encouraging sign. She thanked him for all his kindness to her, which she said that she could never forget or hope to repay, and then added, rather as if she were repeating a speech which she had learnt off by heart—

"I think I ought to tell you now that I have not at all deserved your friendship, because I did you a great injustice when we were in Rome. You remember that article of Mr. Morley's in the *Omniscient Review*, and I dare say you can guess now why I gave it to you to read. The woman whom he referred to as having been married and deserted was, of course, Bessie Green. I

was told that you were her husband—and I believed it. The least I can do is to beg your pardon very humbly and very sincerely."

"I knew nothing about my brother's marriage until after his death," said Walter. "Then I found among his papers a letter which he had written to me informing me of the whole affair. As the woman called herself Mrs. Walter, and as there was so much mystery about her husband, I don't at all wonder that people set me down as the culprit; only it seems rather strange that, knowing all that you did about me, you should have thought such a thing possible."

Norma hung her head. "Yes, of course it must seem strange to you," she confessed. "It seems strange even to me now—but so it was. I didn't wish to believe it; I always maintained both to Madge and to Mr. Morley that the story was untrue."

"Mr. Morley and Lady Shearman were your informants, then? The next time

that I meet Mr. Morley I will take the liberty of ducking him in the nearest horse-pond."

"Oh no, you mustn't do that," said Norma, laughing a little; "he didn't behave badly about it. He quite thought that he was telling the truth when he wrote that article; and as soon as he found out that he had made a mistake he wrote to me and admitted it."

"And Lady Shearman? Well, Lady Shearman can't be ducked in a horse-pond or punished in any other way; though she can hardly have thought that she was telling the truth if she asserted that I was married at the time when I was idiot enough to propose to her. She, at least, must have traduced me deliberately."

"I am not sure," answered Norma doubtfully; "I hope not. But, however that may be, I ought, as you say, to have known you better, and I am not surprised that you can't forgive me."

"Did I say I couldn't forgive you?"

"No; you only implied it. I quite understand—you feel exactly as I should in your place. There are mistakes which are excusable in some people and inexcusable in others."

"But I don't think you do quite understand, Miss Shafto. Nothing that you have ever done or are capable of doing could seem inexcusable to me."

"Oh, that is a way of speaking," returned Norma, with a touch of impatience; "you think I am a poor sort of friend, and you are quite right. A good friend doesn't believe what is palpably false."

"I will tell you what I think," said Walter: "I think you were so disgusted with me for assuring you I had loved you all the time that I fancied myself in love with Lady Shearman—and yet that was the truth—that you were ready to believe worse things of me than I deserved. I wonder whether you believe even now that I love you, and that I have never really loved any one else?"

Norma made no answer. The fact was that he was asking her to believe a good deal; though in truth she wished, as we all do, to believe in the theory of there being but one genuine love in any one's life.

However, he meant to have a reply of some kind from her; so he went on: "I told you that I wouldn't abandon hope, and I haven't quite abandoned it. Still, I think I can see that unless you accept me here and now, you never will. There is just the chance that you might have loved me if you hadn't been told lies about me—and it's my only chance. I would rather hear the best or the worst at once."

He heard neither the one nor the other, for Norma remained silent; but everybody knows that, under certain circumstances, silence is more expressive than speech, and indeed within the space of a very few minutes Walter had exchanged the tone of a suppliant for that which more properly belongs to his sex. Earlier in the day he would, no doubt, have been shocked at the

bare idea of addressing Norma as a goose; yet that was what he called her when she assured him that she did not mean to take what she chose to describe as his money.

"The money is yours," said he; "and if you like to throw it over Westminster Bridge, of course you are at liberty to do so. Only the estate would benefit if you would kindly retain possession of it; because then I shouldn't have to make quite such large settlements upon you. At least, so my aunt says."

Norma and he had a great many questions and answers and observations to interchange, which, since they were of that kind which has been in use among all lovers from time immemorial, had better not be set down here. It is sufficient to mention that they arrived at a very perfect mutual understanding, and that it took them the best part of two hours to say what might have been said in five minutes.

Lady Spencer, patiently occupying her-

self with fancy-work downstairs, only glanced for a moment at her nephew when at length he reappeared, with bright eyes and a smile upon his lips. "Well," said she, "when and where is the ceremony to take place?"

"Oh, we didn't get quite so far as that," answered Walter, laughing.

"Not in all this time? What on earth can you have been talking about then! I am quite at your orders, of course; but if you could make it suit your convenience to let me leave London for a month or two, I should take it as a favour. I have never been here at this time of year before, and I humbly hope that I never shall be again. It is not exhilarating."

Walter assured his aunt that she was free to go away as soon as she pleased. "Indeed," he added meditatively, "I believe a complete change and rest would be the very best thing for Norma just now. Suppose you were to take her to some quiet seaside place until the hot weather is

over? Then I might run down and see you from time to time."

"And my engagements?" asked Lady Spencer. "Are you aware that, in order to oblige you, I have already thrown over three of my friends?"

"And I'm sure you'll oblige me by throwing over the rest," returned Walter, laughing; "you know very well that you'll be only too glad of the excuse. You don't stay in country houses because you like it, but because you would a little bit rather submit to the nuisance of that kind of thing than spend your time quite alone. Well, now I'm giving you the chance of securing the most delightful companion in the whole world for a good many weeks."

"You are kindness itself, and I can't find words to express my gratitude. Anything more thoroughly enjoyable than spending the autumn in seaside lodgings with a young woman who will be chiefly occupied in reading and writing love-letters, it would be difficult to imagine! One thing,

however, you must clearly understand, and that is that I cannot and will not stay through the winter in this country. Therefore you will either have to be married in November, or to wait till next spring, or to find some other old lady to chaperon Miss Shafto."

Of the three alternatives placed before him, the first was the one which commended itself most favourably to Walter, and it was also that which, after some demur on Norma's part, was eventually acted upon. Lady Spencer did not establish herself in lodgings anywhere; but she found a pretty little house in the Isle of Wight, whither she induced Norma to accompany her, and where it may be hoped that she did not find the time hang too heavily upon her hands. Her residence there was enlivened by a good many flying visits from her nephew, who entertained her with a description of the alterations and improvements which he was hastily effecting at Warbury Park, which place he

had made his head-quarters for the time being. He did not, however, mention either to her or to Norma an interview which he had had with Lady Shearman. In the course of it he had made use of some unequivocal and rather impolite language; yet it had been wound up by the conclusion of a treaty of peace.

"Of course," Madge said, "you ascribe the worst possible motives to me, and I won't even attempt to convince you that my one and only object all along has been to do Norma a service. Still, if you and she are going to live here for a part of the year, it seems to me that we had better make friends, as far as we can, and let bygones be bygones."

In this view Walter fully concurred. Probably there is not much love lost between him and Lady Shearman; but they often meet, and always treat one another with courtesy and consideration. Sir Christopher entertains a high opinion of Lord Loddondale, whom he describes as

one of the very few men of his acquaintance who can talk to a pretty woman without making eyes at her; and indeed this encomium would seem to be merited.

The very quiet wedding which was solemnized in London in the month of November was attended only by a few near relations of the contracting parties, and by Miss Travers, who, to tell the truth, asked herself. Both bride and bridegroom being in such deep mourning, it was impossible to lend to the ceremony the character of a fashionable event; and Mr. Basil Morley, who was present as a mere spectator, not as an invited guest, subsequently composed a very touching little poem upon the occasion under the title of "Orange-blossom and Crape."

It will be easily understood how these contradictory emblems were made to harmonize by the pen of so gifted a writer, and with what a subtle and dexterous employment of irony the strains of an epithalamium were mingled with those of

a dirge. Mr. Morley is a not infrequent visitor at Warbury Park, and is upon terms of intimacy with its denizens. He is fond of saying that he counts it as one of his highest privileges to call the Marchioness of Loddondale his friend; but perhaps he will never quite forgive himself for the graceful, yet too hasty manner in which he resigned all claim upon the hand of a lady whom neither he nor anybody else suspected at the time of being an heiress. He now declares that his life must needs be one of comparative solitude; that, after all, is the inevitable fate of genius. "Once," he sighs, "and only once, I thought it might be possible for me to be as other men are; I thought that there was just one person in the world whose lifelong companionship would be a help, not a hindrance, to me in my labours. But that dream has vanished." And so Norma is left to reflect with bitterness upon what she has lost.

If one could venture to predict a happy

life for any two people in the world, that rash prophecy might be made on behalf of Walter and Norma; for in truth they have everything to make them happy, and it would perhaps be unreasonable to deplore events which have converted one of the most promising sculptors of the day into a useful, but not particularly brilliant member of the Upper House.

THE END.

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